

STUDIES IN THE BUDDHIST TRADITIONS

Tripitaka. Sūtrapitaka.

LAND OF BLISS

THE PARADISE OF THE BUDDHA
OF MEASURELESS LIGHT

Sanskrit and Chinese Versions of the
Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtras

Introductions and English Translations by

LUIS O. GÓMEZ



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS, HONOLULU
and
HIGASHI HONGANJI SHINSHŪ ŌTANI-HA, KYOTO

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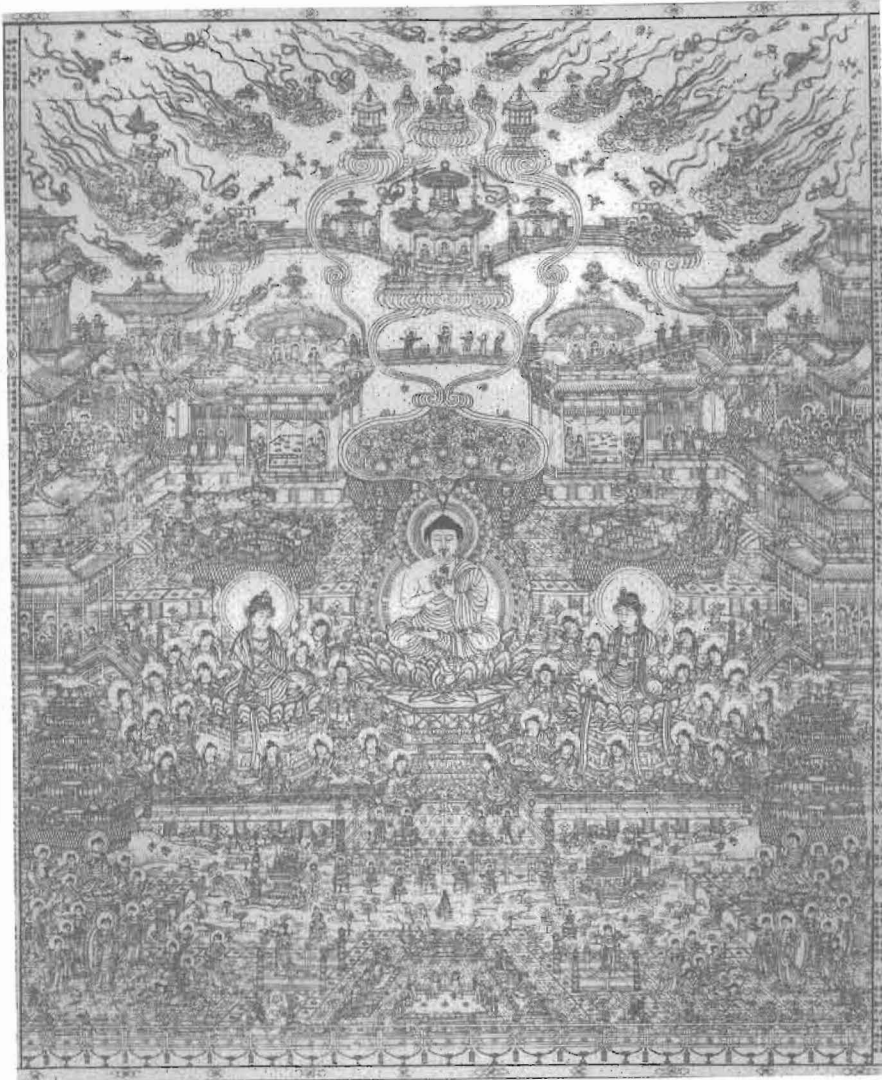
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The frontispiece is a traditional Japanese representation of Amitabha's Pure
Land as it is described in the Meditation Sutra. It is the central portion of
the Kanyō Mandara kept at Tsūgen-in, a branch temple of the Jōdo-shū
denomination in Tokyo. This mandala is here reproduced with the kind
permission of Rev. Maeda Takahide, who generously provided the author
with a woodblock print. The cover art was drawn by Scott A. Schwemmin
of Saline, Michigan, from a detail in the upper section of the mandala.

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those paragraphs in the technical translation. Having stated this principle in the present preface, the endnotes in the present volume will not refer explicitly to the technical translations.

No diacritics are used in the text of the present, "free," translations. Whenever a word is left untranslated it is printed with the anglicized spelling established by convention or the one that represents the closest approximation to the original. In the introduction and the notes, diacritics are used only in the following circumstances: (1) on the first occurrence of a word, where its transliterated form appears in parentheses, italicized, and with its proper diacritic marks, following the anglicized form, and (2) whenever a technical term is explained or defined. These principles have already been observed in this preface.

The glossary appended to this volume provides a handy list of terms, with conventional transliterations and Chinese characters where appropriate. The glossary also provides short explanations of the major technical terms, paraphrases, and translation conventions adopted in the free translations, and to some of the background concepts discussed in the introductions. This tool complements the more integrated and narrative presentation of the introductions.

Part 1

THE SANSKRIT VERSIONS

INTRODUCTIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

Introduction to the Shorter Sutra

The Two Texts and Their Titles

One way of looking at the two sutras is to think of them as links between two worlds. They tell a double story. The first is that of the Buddha Shakyamuni (*Śākyamuni*), speaking as a human being in our world to an audience of human beings. The second narrative is presented through the words of this Buddha, who describes for his disciples a different, distant world. As the audience, we stand in this world of suffering and death while the narrative acquaints us with a hope that is gradually turned into a reality: the presence of a distant paradise, brought near to us through the words of the sutras, made present, as it were, as we get carried into the story.

The two texts lead us to a vision of the paradise of the Buddha Amitabha (*Amitābha*). This is a distant world system (*lokadhātu*) called Sukhavati (*sukhāvatī* or “blissful”—hence the free rendering “Land of Bliss”). Existence in that world is indeed blissful; the inhabitants of that world do not even know the words “evil” and “suffering,” let alone experience any form of pain or suffering. The two texts derive the first part of their Sanskrit titles from the name of this paradise.

The second part of the title of the sutras, *vyūha*, refers to the “magnificent display,” narrative as well as visual, of the wondrous qualities of that paradise.¹ But these texts are not simply descriptions of a paradise; they are authoritative and revelatory depictions of the Land of Bliss. Both texts are considered to belong to the class of texts called *sūtra*. Loosely defined, these are texts that contain the words of the Buddha, and hence carry scriptural authority.² Thus, the complete title of both texts, *Sukhāvatī-vyūha Sūtra*, means “The Sutra on the Display of the [World] of Bliss” or “The Sutra Displaying the [World] of Bliss.”³

Because the two sutras carry the same title and share the same

themes, one has hardly any basis for suggesting different titles for the two works. One of the two, however, is much shorter than the other. Therefore, the two sutras have come to be known in the West as the *Smaller Sukhavativyuha* and the *Larger Sukhavativyuha*, or as *The Smaller Sutra* and *The Larger Sutra*, for short. In the present translation, I have preferred the more idiomatic expressions *The Shorter Sutra* and *The Longer Sutra*.

The two sutras are also preserved in Tibetan translation and in several Chinese renditions. The Chinese translations, as well as the work of Chinese commentators, are an important source for our understanding of the texts. Much of what we read in modern studies about these two sutras is influenced in one way or another by the Chinese tradition, especially as it has come down to us through the work of Japanese commentators, scholars, and missionaries.

In Chinese and Japanese, the Shorter Sutra is usually known as the *Sutra on Amita Buddha*, the Longer Sutra as the *Sutra on Amitayus Buddha*.⁴ Unlike the Sanskrit titles, which are based on the name of Amita Buddha's paradise, the Chinese titles focus on the name of the Buddha presiding over the paradise, who is known as Amita, Amitabha, or Amitayus (*Amitāyus*).⁵

The Message of the Two Sutras⁶

As sacred texts of Mahayana Buddhism, the Shorter and the Longer Sutras share with other texts of the same tradition most of the general beliefs that we have come to associate with this form of Buddhism. They are texts about extraordinary beings who possess wisdom, knowledge, and extraordinary powers. These are the buddhas who have attained supreme enlightenment. The two sutras accept the general assumption that these buddhas started their spiritual careers with a solemn promise and determination to become *bodhisattvas*, that is, aspirants to awakening. The promise takes the form of a vow, a solemn attestation to their inviolable determination to pursue the long and arduous career that leads to full awakening.⁷ Those who have reached the end of this difficult path serve as teachers, and saviors to other sentient beings. They can also appear in miraculous manifestations or in the visions of deep meditation, sometimes surrounded by other beings who are themselves on their way to enlightenment and are now advanced bodhisattvas.

One can in fact read the two sutras merely in the context of these generalized Mahayana beliefs. But to do so would give only a superficial reading of the texts. One would gloss over what is specific to these texts. The Sanskrit titles of the sutras point to one dimension of the sutras: the central topic, the Land of Bliss. The Chinese titles point to

the central figure of the two texts: the Buddha Amitabha. The meaning of these two central topics is best clarified by trying to understand the way in which the two texts present a *mise-en-scène*, a story, and a variety of voices.

Setting

On a first reading, it is helpful to focus on understanding the assumptions of the sutras regarding time, "historical" truth, and cosmology. In the present introduction, however, I bracket questions of history and social origins, and even issues of doctrinal polemics (all of which will be taken up in the introductions to the technical translations).

Although the two sutras differ in detail and in the degree to which each is committed to different dimensions of the cosmic, mythic, and ideal world of Indian Mahayana Buddhism, they both share a common world view. In outline form, this world view includes the following three central features (all occurring in both the Shorter and the Longer Sutra). First, the structure of a typical world system corresponds to different degrees of spiritual progress, conceived as different forms of rebirth. Sentient beings will be reborn in a more or less fortunate form of rebirth, depending on each one's spiritual progress. This conception is closely connected to the unquestioned belief in the coexistence of spiritual beings, benevolent or malevolent, joyous or woeful, with "natural" sentient beings—humans and animals. Second, there is more than one world system (more than one "inhabited world," we would say today), but the most important differences among these worlds are not so much cosmographic as spiritual. Third, the more fortunate among the world systems have a buddha who, accompanied by a retinue of bodhisattvas, guards over and promotes the spiritual health of his world (called his "buddha-field").

The sutra presents itself as partly a dialogue, partly a sermon, taking place in India, at the time of the Buddha Shakyamuni (*Śākyamuni*),⁸ near the ancient city of Shravasti (*Śrāvastī*). But the implicit setting is a cosmos of many world systems, of many forms of rebirth. The discourse itself, moreover, creates an image of some of these world systems, in particular the paradise of Amitabha. The location of the sutra is thus both this, our world, and the distant paradise of Amitabha. The time is both the semimythical time of the period when the Buddha Shakyamuni wandered in the Ganges Valley and the mythical time of the eternal light of Amitabha.

Dramatis Personae

The "buddhas" of our text may be conceptualized provisionally as falling into three categories. First is the "Buddha" known as the founder

of Buddhism, or the “historical Buddha.” Second are the myriad buddhas of other worlds, sometimes called “celestial buddhas” in Western literature on Buddhism. Among these we may distinguish a third class, the celestial buddhas that have identifying names, characteristics, and, in many cases, mythical life histories.⁹

The authors of the two sutras, whoever they may have been, evidently belonged to a community that considered itself Buddhist—that is to say, a community that believed that its most cherished religious values and practices had been taught by “the Buddha,” an enlightened being known as Shakyamuni. In the two sutras, Shakyamuni is the main speaker, and he is also a mouthpiece for religious truth. It is he who, in the Shorter Sutra, introduces us to the existence of other worlds, distant worlds, each presided over by a different “buddha” (in the second meaning of the term). The most important figure introduced and praised by Shakyamuni is the Buddha Amitabha (category three of “buddhas”).

The Story

The two sutras, then, are presented as composed mostly of the words of Shakyamuni Buddha. He, as an authoritative figure from the historical but distant past, reveals to us the main message of the two sutras. This message is, in brief, as follows: Far from our own world is found another world, free of suffering and evil. It is a world that has been made pure, beautiful, and blissful by a buddha named Amitabha, or “Measureless Light,” and also known as the Buddha Amitayus, “Measureless Life.”¹⁰ This message is presented within a narrative frame, which in the Shorter Sutra is a dialogue between Shakyamuni and his disciple Shariputra (*Śāriputra*).

Leaving a detailed discussion of the Longer Sutra for the introduction that precedes it, we may now look more closely at the structure and content, at the narrative frame and the core message, of the Shorter Sutra.

The Shorter Sutra: A Preview

In the Shorter Sutra, the frame “story” is an uncomplicated setting: Shakyamuni speaks to his disciple Shariputra, who barely speaks, and then only in response to Shakyamuni’s questions. The sutra begins and ends with the formulaic opening and closing characteristic of the Mahayana sutra genre. These formulas frame the rest of the text, composed mostly of Shakyamuni’s discourse. This is the core of the text, set off as sacred utterances by the stereotyped formulas.

The core of the text (that is, Shakyamuni’s discourse) can be divided into four major parts: (1) without preamble or pretext, Shakya-

muni describes the Land of Bliss and its buddha, the Buddha Amitabha; (2) he names some of the buddhas in other worlds who confirm the truth of Shakyamuni’s message as they praise their own perfected worlds; (3) he explains the nature of the trust and commitment required for rebirth in the Land of Bliss, and connects this theme to an alternative title for the sutra (“Embraced by All Buddhas”); and (4) he explains how difficult it is to attain buddhahood and preach the message of the sutra in an unbelieving age.

Although the narrative structure of the sutra is relatively simple and appears to serve mostly as a frame, one can read the text as a weaving of several voices, perspectives, and personae. First, there is the person of Ananda (*Ānanda*), the Buddha’s closest disciple, who is the presumed narrator of all sutras. Second, within the narrative itself is an audience of thousands of monks, arhats, bodhisattvas, and celestial beings. Third, among these is Shariputra, who often serves as both a stand-in for the sutra’s readers or audiences, and as a sidekick of sorts.¹¹ Fourth, Shakyamuni Buddha invokes the authority of other buddhas in distant world systems, who form part of this panoply of the most holy and divine of sentient beings. Fifth is Amitabha himself and the inhabitants of the Land of Bliss. No one in this fifth group is properly speaking an actor in the narrative, but their presence in the descriptive passages serves as a different “voice,” one that convinces the reader of the reality of the Land of Bliss.

The “characters” in the “story” serve different purposes. Shakyamuni, for instance, is a link between the reader or audience and the tradition of Buddhism. His presence confirms the reader’s historical connections to the origins of Buddhism; the sutra becomes a text rooted in history, and history in religion usually means authority. At the same time, Shakyamuni, together with the celestial buddhas he invokes, creates a point of view that places us in this world looking out into cosmic space, towards the Land of Bliss.

Behind the Story

The story of the sutra is set in a world of tradition and myth. Time and location, temporal and spatial dimensions, are without question of a special kind—one that we could perhaps call sacral or mythical, for lack of a better word. Extraordinary rules and boundaries also apply to body and action, spirit and matter, the ideal and the real. Access to these special dimensions of reality is possible through a set of assumptions about the world and the beings that inhabit it and through an accompanying belief and confidence in the spiritual realities and processes embodied in the mythology.

Among many differences between the world view of the two texts

and the world view of contemporary Western secular culture, two stand out as central to understanding the message of the two sutras. First, existence after death is a given; but it is not simply an extension of human life. Existence after death means the possibility—or rather, the reality—of many lives, in a variety of realms other than our world, and in a variety of roles or “incarnations” that include rebirth as an animal, as a hungry ghost, or in one of many paradises, or rebirth in a hell or purgatory, and rebirth in other world systems as well.

Second, the process of rebirth is for most of us sentient beings an unending cycle of suffering. This cycle would be a desperate, hopeless, and meaningless eternal return if it were not for the possibility of deliverance. The moral and spiritual quality of our lives can have a significant effect on the course of our wandering through the many rounds of rebirth. Human beings who attain moral and spiritual perfection may in fact attain liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Those who attain liberation through their own spiritual effort are the buddhas of the universe. In turn, the moral and spiritual quality of buddhas can also have a significant effect on the course of our journey through the many stations of rebirth—in other words, the liberation of buddhas facilitates the liberation of other, less perfect sentient beings.

Much of Mahayana Buddhist literature is devoted to these two issues: the manner in which human beings attain the perfection of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the manner in which buddhas and bodhisattvas assist other beings in their quest for liberation from suffering. The concrete manifestations of these two constellations of belief in the Shorter and the Longer Sutra define their specific doctrine of Buddhist faith. The two sutras, however, prefer description or depiction over doctrinal exposition. Thus, the “doctrine” of the two sutras is implicitly defined by the way in which they describe or suggest the nature and the geography of life after death, the physical appearance of buddhas and liberated beings, and by the imagery they use in representing the nature of our relationship to buddhas and their saving powers.

Buddhas and Buddha-fields

The universe of the classical Buddhist Indian imagination was a system of parallel worlds, all of which shared a similar structure. Although simple worlds could cluster in different ways into more complex world spheres or world systems, each individual world had the same number of continents, with the same shape and the same rivers and mountain ranges.¹² The worlds differed, however, in the degree of happiness and virtue enjoyed by the human beings inhabiting each one of them. Some of these worlds—the most fortunate—were blessed by the presence of a perfectly enlightened buddha.¹³ This buddha presided over the spiritual life of his world, making it his own “buddha-

field,” or sphere of spiritual influence.¹⁴ It was believed that in some of these worlds the presiding buddha had “purified” his “field” to the point of transforming his world into a land completely free of evil, suffering, and unhappiness. A “purified field” did not fit the mold of the standard world system—even its topography was often different. It would be replete with beautiful gardens; the air would be permeated by sweet fragrances and enchanting melodies; the land would be endowed with many marvels, and its inhabitants with miraculous powers—in short, these lands were veritable paradises.

In ancient India, and later in East Asia, one such world dominated the faith and captured the imagination of millions. This is the land of the Buddha Amitabha, the buddha-field called the “Land of Bliss.”¹⁵ This is indeed a world very different from other worlds. Not only is it a land of pure bliss, it is also a land of great marvels. Everything there happens as if by magic; rivers and forests are filled with precious jewels; birds sing expositions of the Buddha’s teachings. In this land there is no evil or danger. One will not even find there the storms and inclement weather, or even the rugged mountains and impassable forests, that made life in ancient India so harsh.

One Buddha, Many Buddhas

Although I am sure most readers will have some notion of what the words “buddha” and “paradise” convey, some may wonder what may be the exact meaning of these terms *in the context of our two sutras*. The religion of these texts belongs to a type of religious belief and practice that may seem foreign to readers familiar with other forms of Buddhism, as well as to those familiar with other conceptions of “paradise,” saviors, or savioresses.

Some readers may be wondering what the connection is between the buddha of the Land of Bliss, called the Buddha Amitabha, and “Buddha,” the founder of Buddhism. Furthermore, the idea of *many buddhas* paired with a clear predilection for one buddha, and for a buddha who is not the founder of Buddhism, may give rise to some confusion. For many of us the expressions “Buddha” or “the Buddha” refer to one presumably historical person. This person is known to us as Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha who lived in India more than two thousand years ago and founded the religion of Buddhism. Another common name for this historical person, Shakyamuni (“The Sage of the Shakya Clan”), may also come to mind when we speak of “Buddha.” But in the mythology of Mahayana Buddhism, Shakyamuni is a buddha, certainly an important figure, and yet *one of many* buddhas. He may serve as the mouthpiece, and the vehicle for revelation, but he is not unique.

Furthermore, what we may regard as his teachings are seen as only

one of many "teachings of the Buddha(s)." Thus, if we are to understand the message of the Shorter and the Longer Sutras, we must adjust our vision first to a panorama of many buddhas, a grand vision of a universe populated by many advanced spiritual beings, all making some claim on spiritual authority. Second, we must work with the contradictory claim of a special status for one single buddha, a spiritual *primus inter pares*.

Ultimately, however, our texts appeal to the authority of Shakyamuni. He is still recognized as the founder of Buddhism as we know it, and his historical reality is never open to question. But even then, he is often only the mouthpiece for the beliefs held by various Buddhist communities during the long history of the Buddhist faith. In this sense, it is indeed appropriate to speak, albeit metaphorically, of the existence of many buddhas, each speaking for his own sacred person and holy word, each making a claim on the believer's faith and commitment. It is also appropriate to speak of these buddhas as visions presented to us through the eyes of Shakyamuni and in the historical setting of his audiences. And it is also possible to see Shakyamuni's teachings as only a prototype for the words being spoken in many worlds by many buddhas. The Shorter Sutra invites us to imagine each buddha in the universe engaged in the same revelatory role assumed by Shakyamuni in the sutras:

in the same way that I [Shakyamuni] now praise that buddha-field, the Land of Bliss, other buddhas, blessed ones, in the eastern regions of the universe, praise their fields—buddhas equal in number to the grains of sand in all the Ganges rivers in every world, . . . each one of these buddhas covers his own buddha-field with his tongue and then reveals all that is in it. [Sv §21 ff.]¹⁶

Thus, Shakyamuni opens for us this vista of faraway worlds that echoes and confirms the message of Buddhism. But, in their plurality, each of the many buddhas of other world spheres formulates his *own* teaching and reveals his *own* world of salvation. Standing out among them is Amitabha, whose paradise is implicitly presented in the two sutras as far superior to any other world. But this superior status places him and his world above our own world and its buddha—in other words, above Shakyamuni himself. We may say, then, that from the perspective of our two texts, the founder of Buddhism, Shakyamuni, reveals the many buddhas of the universe, one of whom, Amitabha, then makes his own independent and stronger claim on our faith and devotion.

But what kind of beings are these buddhas from distant world spheres? Our notion of the Buddha as an enlightened human being, as a human being transformed by his own effort, is colored by Western

notions of what is natural and what is human. We see the Buddha either as an example of what we can become or as a metaphor for spiritual growth. But the Buddha is much more than that. Often, the word "buddha" does not refer to a "natural" or "historical" human being. This other buddha is still a very concrete entity, an individual, not a metaphor; but it is also an impossible ideal, not a model. One may say that this other buddha is an extraordinary human, but only if one thinks of the extraordinary as something in the realm of the fantastic. For the buddha of the two sutras is not simply an exceptional human being, but a superhuman being. His perfection is such that one easily loses sight of the effort and the gradual path that lead from common humanity to buddhahood. The next step comes easily: The gap between perfect buddha and common human is such that one can easily envision buddhas as semidivine, celestial beings.

Teacher and Superhuman Being

Again, in the Indian context this digression into the fantastic does not contradict the other image we have of the Buddha as teacher. For the Indian spiritual teacher is often seen as the embodiment of the holy, the presence of the divine in human form. Contrary to the assumption of several generations of Western scholars, in the Indian view a human religious teacher, if he is in the ranks of spiritual masters, may have many superhuman traits and faculties (such as wonder-working powers, omniscience, mind reading). Moreover, his disciples may believe in the presence of such traits even during the master's lifetime.

We are therefore not surprised to see the human teacher, the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, revealing the suprahistorical, the celestial Buddha Amitabha, whose life and paradise he, Shakyamuni, knows directly.

Faith, Trust, and Resolution¹⁷

Early Western notions of Buddhism derived for the most part from books, or if not from books, then from the religious practices and ideas of Westerners who likewise relied on their own literacy to learn about Buddhism. These ideas reflected the concern of the authors of those books with the doctrines of canonical Buddhist scriptures or with the speculations of Buddhist intellectuals and meditating yogis. A recent shift in some circles towards the teachings of living Buddhist teachers has acted as a corrective to this perception. Yet even those Westerners who have traveled to Asia and practiced among Asian Buddhists tend to become interested in Buddhism for its theories and practices of self-discipline, especially those connected with the practice of "meditation." Thus, Western images of Buddhism have tended to center on some form of cerebral assimilation of Buddhist ideals. More often than

not, Westerners have concerned themselves with a spirituality that is centered on self-cultivation by means of mental training and discipline, or on the theories of monk-scholars. The end result of this self-cultivation is generally described as the attainment, in this life, of a "direct" spiritual experience that is often conceived of as private and empowering, and as a primarily cognitive grasp of an impersonal reality.

But for millions of Asian Buddhists, this image of Buddhism represents only a fraction of what comes to their minds. For many there is more to Buddhism than meditation, renunciation, serenity, or mental cultivation, and more than the speculations of philosophers and scholars. The other sides of Buddhism take many forms, but if we focus only on the two sutras, we may say that throughout their history they have been valued by Buddhists who believed in a plurality of "transcendent" or "celestial" buddhas and relied on the "saving grace" of these buddhas.¹⁸ Thus, among those who consider themselves Buddhists, there are those who turn to the Buddha, or to many buddhas, as a source of guidance and inspiration, and there are those who base their religious thought and practice on their faith in the saving power of the buddhas. As one moves towards the latter of these two models, one enters the sphere of a Buddhism of faith and devotion.

And yet, trust in the Buddha's grace and the ideals of self-cultivation are connected in at least two important ways. In the first place, the ideal of the saint seeking his own spiritual perfection is the backdrop and the frame for our story. The places and events described in the two sutras are possible only because there are buddhas, that is, human beings who have achieved through their own efforts the highest spiritual perfection—they have *become* buddhas. This is a point clearly emphasized in the Longer Sutra, but is also implicit in the Shorter Sutra's effort to highlight the difficulty of Shakyamuni's mission.

The Buddhism of faith shifts emphasis and tone by setting as paradigm the solemn desire to be reborn in the Land of Bliss and as goal the spiritual perfection that is attained effortlessly in Amitabha's paradise. These two ideals contrast sharply—at least on the surface—with the paradigm set by the vows of those who promise to follow the arduous path to awakening with the goal of gradual self-cultivation through innumerable rebirths. We know the shift is an almost complete reversal when the delights of the Land of Bliss appear as the most important motivation for the vow. In both sutras one detects a certain hesitation between the exaltation of the effort of a buddha like Shakyamuni, the exaltation of the Land of Bliss as a place for the attainment of liberation, and the glorification of the beauties of the Land of Bliss.

Rebirth

The particular form of the "Buddhism of faith" embodied in the two sutras therefore redefines traditional terms, retaining as the invariant element the basic structure and terminology of the ascetic path of salvation, but allowing ample room for variance in the stated goal and in the mythological expression of the ascetic concepts. Thus, "rebirth" is now less a matter of suffering in the rounds of transmigration and more a matter of attaining birth in the Land of Bliss. Although the same terms are used, this is a different type of "rebirth."

The two sutras do not deny the possibility of existence after death in a variety of realms other than our world or other than the Land of Bliss. But they are concerned with rebirth in that one last, extraordinary realm, the Land of Bliss. This Buddhism of faith does not abandon the conviction that the moral quality of our actions and the moral and spiritual quality of the actions and character of the buddhas who come to our aid can have a significant effect on the outcome of our wandering over effort, and the ideal is not one of imitating the buddhas or deserving rebirth in the Land of Bliss. The general presuppositions of Buddhism are redefined to include the possibility of spiritual progress by reliance on the spiritual power of the buddhas who have already attained perfection and have created a place where one can attain perfection with their assistance.

Embraced by All Buddhas

It is therefore not surprising that within the Shorter Sutra itself Shakyamuni proposes an alternative title to that sutra, "Embraced by All Buddhas." For the vows of buddhas are now not so much models as sources of a saving power that embraces and surrounds sentient beings. The closest that believers come to imitating the buddhas is with a solemn desire to be reborn in the Land of Bliss that echoes the original resolution of buddhas when they set out on the career of a bodhisattva.

The Shorter Sutra sees the Land of Bliss as its primary theme. Praise of the Land of Bliss and its buddha, Amitabha, are the main topic and intention of the sutra. Still, the alternative title "Embraced by All Buddhas" suggests that many buddhas have powers similar to those of Amitabha. This contrasts sharply with the centrality of Amitabha in the Longer Sutra. One wonders whether this difference does not suggest either a major doctrinal difference, or a historical evolution.¹⁹

The Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha Sutra

English Translation of the Sanskrit Text

The Shorter Discourse

The Array of Wondrous Qualities

Adorning the Land of Bliss

Preamble: The Setting and the Audience

- §1. This I have heard. At one time the Blessed One, the Buddha Shakyamuni, was staying near the city of Shravasti, in the cloistered garden that the generous Anathapindada gave to the Buddhist Order in Prince Jeta's grove.
- §2. He was staying there with a large gathering of monks numbering one thousand two hundred fifty. These monks were well known for their extraordinary powers. They were true elders, great disciples. They had all achieved the highest degree of sainthood, that of an arhat.
- §3. Among these arhats surrounding the Blessed One were the elder Shariputra and his close friend Maudgalyayana the Great. Kashyapa the Great was also among them, and Kapphina the Great, Katyayana the Great, and Kaushtila the Great. Also among these monks were Revata and Shuddhipanthaka, and the Buddha's half-brother Nanda, and his cousin and closest disciple, Ananda, as well as Rahula, the Buddha's son. Present there was also Gavampati, and Bharadvaja, Kalodayin, Vakkula, and Aniruddha. These and other, many more, great disciples accompanied the Buddha at that time.
- §4. And the Buddha was accompanied by many of those magnificent human beings well advanced on their way to full awakening, those who are called bodhisattvas or mahasattvas. For instance, the Bodhisattva Manjushri, the Prince of Dharma, was present in that assembly—and so was the bodhisattva who is the Future Buddha of our age, the Bodhisattva Maitreya, who is called Invincible. And the bodhisattvas Gandhastin, Nityodyukta, and

Anikshiptadhura were there. These and other, many more, bodhi-sattvas or mahasattvas accompanied the Buddha at that time.

- §5. Also present were Shakra, known also as Indra, the King of the Gods, and Brahma, Lord of this, our world, known as the Saha World. These and other heavenly beings—many hundreds of thousands of millions—accompanied the Buddha at that time.¹

The Main Discourse

The Land of Bliss

- §6. Then, the Blessed One addressed the reverend Shariputra, saying: "To the west of us, Shariputra, a hundred thousand million buddha-fields from where we are, there is a world called the Land of Bliss. At this very moment, the tathagata, arhat, perfect and full buddha called Amitayus lives in that buddha-field; he abides and remains there, and even now continues to teach the Dharma in that field.²
- §7. "Now, what do you think, Shariputra: Why is that world called the 'Land of Bliss'? Shariputra, physical and mental pain are unknown to the living beings that inhabit the world called the 'Land of Bliss'; on the contrary, they only experience conditions of boundless happiness. This is why that world is called the 'Land of Bliss.'
- §8. "Furthermore, Shariputra, the world known as the Land of Bliss is adorned and enclosed on every side by seven railings and seven rows of palm trees, all decked with nets of tinkling bells. It is made colorful and attractive by four precious substances, namely, gold, silver, emerald, and rock crystal.
- "This is how that buddha-field is adorned, Shariputra, with such a panoply of the wondrous qualities of buddha-fields.
- §9. "Furthermore, Shariputra, in the world known as the Land of Bliss there are lotus ponds, all made of seven precious substances, namely, gold, silver, emerald, rock crystal, red pearl, sapphire, and mother of pearl as the seventh. These ponds are brimming with water that is cool, clear, sweet, light, soft, free from odor, free from disease, refreshing, and invigorating. In each of these ponds the bottom slopes gently along the shore, so that the water reaches the right depth in every bathing spot and a crow could drink from the edge of the pond. The bottom of each pond is covered with golden sand. And all around on each of the four sides of these lotus ponds four sets of stairways descend into the pools. These stairways are colorful, elegant, and made of four precious substances, namely, gold, silver, emerald, and rock crystal. And on every side of these lotus ponds grow gem trees, colorful

and graceful, made from seven precious substances, namely, gold, silver, emerald, rock crystal, red pearl, sapphire, and mother of pearl as the seventh.

"And in those lotus ponds grow lotus flowers. Some are blue—intensely blue, or with a blue sheen, or with a tinge of blue. Some are yellow—intensely yellow, or with a yellow sheen, or with a tinge of yellow. Some are red—intensely red, or with a red sheen, or with a tinge of red. Some are white—intensely white, with a white sheen, or with a tinge of white. Some are multicolored—intensely multicolored, with a sheen of many colors, or with a tinge of many colors. And these lotus blossoms are as wide as chariot wheels.

"This is how that buddha-field is adorned, Shariputra, with such a panoply of the wondrous qualities of buddha-fields.

- §10. "Furthermore, Shariputra, in that buddha-field one hears heavenly musical instruments constantly being played. And the ground all around is golden in color, pleasant to look at. And in that buddha-field a shower of heavenly coral-tree blossoms pours down three times every day and three times every night. And the living beings who are born there travel before their forenoon meal to other worlds, where they worship a hundred thousand million buddhas, and then return to their own world, the Land of Bliss, in time for the afternoon nap, having showered a hundred thousand million flowers upon each one of those buddhas.³

"This is how that buddha-field is adorned, Shariputra, with such a panoply of the wondrous qualities of buddha-fields.

- §11. "Furthermore, Shariputra, in that buddha-field wild geese, curlews, and peacocks gather three times every night and three times every day to sing in chorus, each singing with a different voice. And as they sing, one hears that their voices proclaim Buddhist virtues, such as the five spiritual faculties, the five spiritual powers, and the seven elements of awakening. When human beings in that world hear these sounds, their thoughts turn to the Buddha, their thoughts turn to the Buddha's teaching, the Dharma, and their thoughts turn to the Buddha's Order, the Sangha.

- §12. "Now, Shariputra, what do you think? Are these birds born from other birds? You could not consider this possible. Why? Because even the names of the hells, the names of animal rebirths, and the name 'Realm of Yama, the King of Death' are unknown in that buddha-field—let alone actual birth in any of these forms.⁴ Rather, those flocks of birds gather there to sing with the voice of the Dharma only because they have been created magically by the Buddha who presides in that field, the Tathagata Amitayus.⁵

"This is how that buddha-field is adorned, Shariputra, with such a panoply of the wondrous qualities of buddha-fields.

- §13. "Furthermore, Shariputra, when the rows of palm trees and nets of tinkling bells in that buddha-field sway in the wind, a sweet and enrapturing sound issues from them. This concert of sounds is, Shariputra, like a set of heavenly cymbals, with a hundred thousand million playing parts—when these cymbals are played by expert musicians, a sweet and enrapturing sound issues from them. In exactly the same way, a sweet and enrapturing sound proceeds from those rows of palm trees and those nets of tinkling bells when they sway in the wind. When human beings in that world hear this sound, they remember the Buddha and feel his presence in their whole body, they remember the Dharma and feel its presence in their whole body, and they remember the Sangha and feel its presence in their whole body.⁶

"This is how that buddha-field is adorned, Shariputra, with such a panoply of the wondrous qualities of buddha-fields."

The Buddha Presiding over the Land of Bliss

- §14. "Now, what do you think, Shariputra? Why is that tathagata called Amitayus, or 'Measureless Life-span'? Now, Shariputra, the length of that tathagata's life and of the human beings in that buddha-field is immeasurable. This is why that tathagata is called Amitayus, 'Measureless Life-span.'

"And ten cosmic ages have passed, Shariputra, since this tathagata awoke to unsurpassable, perfect, and full awakening.

- §15. "What do you think, Shariputra? Why is this tathagata called Amitabha, or 'Measureless Light'? Now, Shariputra, the light of this tathagata spreads unimpeded over all buddha-fields. This is why this tathagata is called Amitabha, 'Measureless Light.'

The Inhabitants of the Land of Bliss

- §16. "And, Shariputra, this tathagata is surrounded by an immeasurable assembly of disciples, who are all pure arhats and whose number is impossible to count.

"This is how that buddha-field is adorned, Shariputra, with such a panoply of the wondrous qualities of buddha-fields."

- §17. "Furthermore, Shariputra, those sentient beings who are reborn in the buddha-field of the Tathagata Amitayus as pure bodhisattvas who will not fall back and will be separated from awakening by only one birth—the number of these bodhisattvas, Shariputra, is not easy to reckon. One can only approximate their numbers by saying that they are immeasurable and countless.

Exhortation

- §18. "Now, Shariputra, sentient beings should set their minds on rebirth in that buddha-field. Why? Because there they will meet persons like themselves, who practice the good. For, Shariputra, living beings are not reborn in that buddha-field of the Tathagata Amitayus as the result of an inferior root of merit.
- §19. "Shariputra, those sons or daughters of good families who will hear the name of the blessed Amitayus, the Tathagata, and then will bring it to mind, and will keep it in mind without distraction for one night, or two, or three, four, five, six, or seven nights—they will be met by the Tathagata at the moment of their death. When the moment of death approaches for one of these sons or daughters of good families, Amitayus the Tathagata, surrounded by an assembly of disciples and at the head of a host of bodhisattvas, will stand before this son or daughter, and this son or daughter will die with a mind that is free from distorted views. After they die, they will be reborn in the Land of Bliss, in the buddha-field of Amitayus the Tathagata."
- §20. Therefore, Shariputra, as I understand well the meaning of this, I declare: 'Sons and daughters of a good family should direct their thoughts earnestly towards rebirth in that buddha-field.' "

Confirmation: All Buddhas Praise Their Fields

- §21. "Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise that buddha-field, the Land of Bliss, other buddhas, blessed ones, in the eastern regions of the universe, praise their fields—buddhas equal in number to the grains of sand in all the Ganges rivers in every world in the eastern regions of the universe. Led by the Tathagata Akshobhya, the Tathagata Merudhvaja, the Tathagata Mahameru, the Tathagata Meruprabhasa, and the Tathagata Manjudhvaja, each one of these buddhas covers his own buddha-field with his tongue and then reveals all that is in it.⁷ You should place your trust in this discourse on Dharma, called 'Embraced by All Buddhas,' which extols inconceivable wondrous qualities.⁸
- §22. "In the same manner, other buddhas, blessed ones, in the southern regions of the universe, praise their fields—buddhas equal in number to the grains of sand in all the Ganges rivers in every world in the southern regions of the universe. Led by the Tathagata Candrasuryapradipa, the Tathagata Yashahprabha, the Tathagata Maharchiskandha, the Tathagata Merupradipa, and the Tathagata Anantavirya, each covers his own buddha-field with his tongue and then reveals all that is in it. You should place your trust

in this discourse on the Dharma, called 'Embraced by All Buddhas,' which extols inconceivable qualities.

- §23. "In the same manner, other buddhas, blessed ones, in the western regions of the universe, praise their fields—buddhas equal in number to the grains of sand in all the Ganges rivers in every world in the western regions of the universe. Led by the Tathagata Amitayus,⁹ the Tathagata Amitaskandha, the Tathagata Amitadh-vaja, the Tathagata Mahaprabha, the Tathagata Maharatnaketu, and the Tathagata Shuddharashmiprabha, each covers his own buddha-field with his tongue and then reveals all that is in it. You should place your trust in this discourse on the Dharma, called 'Embraced by All Buddhas,' which extols inconceivable qualities.
- §24. "In the same manner, other buddhas, blessed ones, in the northern regions of the universe, praise their fields—buddhas equal in number to the grains of sand in all the Ganges rivers in every world in the northern regions of the universe. Led by the Tathagata Maharuciskandha, the Tathagata Vaishvanaranirghosha, the Tathagata Dundubhisvaranirghosha, the Tathagata Dushpradharsha, the Tathagata Adityasambhava, the Tathagata Jalini-prabha, and the Tathagata Prabhakara, each covers his own buddha-field with his tongue and then reveals all that is in it. You should place your trust in this discourse on the Dharma, called 'Embraced by All Buddhas,' which extols inconceivable wondrous qualities.
- §25. "In the same manner, other buddhas, blessed ones, in the lower regions of the universe, praise their fields—buddhas equal in number to the grains of sand in all the Ganges rivers in every world in the lower regions of the universe. Led by the Tathagata named Shiksha, the Tathagata Yashas, the Tathagata Yashahprabhasa, the Tathagata Dharma, the Tathagata Dharmadhara, and the Tathagata Dharmadhvaja, each covers his own buddha-field with his tongue and then reveals all that is in it. You should place your trust in this discourse on the Dharma, called 'Embraced by All Buddhas,' which extols inconceivable wondrous qualities.
- §26. "In the same manner, other buddhas, blessed ones, in the higher regions of the universe, praise their fields—buddhas equal in number to the grains of sand in all the Ganges rivers in every world in the higher regions of the universe. Led by the Tathagata Brahmaghosha, the Tathagata Nakshatraraja, the Tathagata Indraketurhvararaja, the Tathagata Gandhottama, the Tathagata Gandhaprabhasa, the Tathagata Maharciskandha, the Tathagata Ratnakusumasampushpitagatra, the Tathagata Shalendraraja, the Tathagata Ratnotpalashri, the Tathagata Sarvarthadarsha, and the Tathagata Sumerukalpa, each covers his own buddha-field with his tongue and then reveals all that is in it. You should place your

trust in this discourse on the Dharma, called 'Embraced by All Buddhas,' which extols inconceivable wondrous qualities."

Trust, Commitment, Embracing

Exhortation by Shakyamuni

- §27. "Now what do you think about this, Shariputra, why is that discourse on Dharma called 'Embraced by All Buddhas'? Those sons or daughters of a good family who hear the name of this discourse on the Dharma and remember the names of these buddhas, blessed ones, will all be embraced by all these buddhas and will never retreat in their pursuit of unsurpassable, perfect, and full awakening. Therefore, Shariputra, believe in me, and believe in these buddhas, blessed ones; place your trust in us, and do not doubt us."

Benefits of the Vow

- §28. "Those sons or daughters of a good family, Shariputra, who have set their minds on rebirth in the buddha-field of Amitayus, the Blessed One, the Tathagata, or those who are now setting their minds, or will set their minds, on such rebirth, they will never retreat in their pursuit of unsurpassable, perfect, and full awakening; they have been reborn, are now being reborn, or will be reborn in that buddha-field. Therefore, Shariputra, sons or daughters of good families who have faith should actively direct their thoughts towards rebirth in that buddha-field."

Exhortation by All Buddhas: The Buddha's Task

- §29. "And, Shariputra, just as I at present here extol the inconceivable wondrous qualities of other buddhas, blessed ones, so in the same manner, Shariputra, all those other buddhas, blessed ones, extol these inconceivable wondrous qualities of mine, saying: 'A most difficult task has been accomplished by the Blessed One, Shakyamuni, the Sage of the Shakyas, the Monarch of the Shakyas. After he awakened to unsurpassable, perfect, and full awakening in this Saha World, he taught a Dharma that the whole world was reluctant to accept, at a time when the cosmic age was in a period of decay, when living beings were in a period of decay, when views and opinions corrupted human beings, when the length of human life had declined, when the afflictions vitiated human beings.'¹⁰
- §30. "This was, even for me, Shariputra, a most difficult task, namely, that after I awakened to unsurpassable, perfect, and full awakening in this Saha World, I taught a Dharma that the whole world was reluctant to accept, at a time when living beings were in

a period of decay, when views and opinions corrupted human beings, when the afflictions vitiated human beings, when the length of human life had declined, when the cosmic age was in a period of decay.”

Coda

- §31. This was spoken by the Blessed One. The reverend Shari-putra, and the bodhisattvas, and the whole world as well—including its gods, humans, asuras, and heavenly gandharva musicians—felt enraptured, and they rejoiced at the words spoken by the Blessed One.

Introduction to the Longer Sutra

The Message of the Two Sutras

This introduction is devoted to a review of the mythic and literary background of the “story” developed in the two sutras, focusing in particular on the Longer Sutra and on the “life story” of its central character—the holy person of the Buddha Amitabha—as related in that sutra. The introduction also explores the description of Amitabha’s paradise, the nature of rebirth in his paradise, and the position of these beliefs within Buddhist doctrine and practice in general.

In the introduction to the Shorter Sutra I referred to the role of the Buddha Shakyamuni in the narrative of the two sutras. I suggested that in the Shorter Sutra his presence serves as a historical anchor, an authoritative narrative voice, and a point of view that places us in this world looking out towards the Land of Bliss. By introducing these concepts then, I intended to call the reader’s attention to the ways in which sacred reality, mythological allusions, and literary imagination weave the tapestry of the Shorter and the Longer Sutras. In this second introduction we can look at these dimensions of our text in more detail, preparing ourselves for a careful reading of a lengthier and more complex sacred story—the narrative of the Longer Sutra.

In some ways, the Longer Sutra can be seen as an expansion of the Shorter Sutra.¹ In both sutras Amitabha and his purified buddha-field appear as realities in the present—distant, and wondrous, but somehow living presences. In the Shorter Sutra, however, they appear as if they had no history. The Longer Sutra supplies this history; it expands the story in time—by describing the causes and conditions for Amitabha’s enlightenment and for the purification of his field. It expands the panorama in space—by depicting the Land of Bliss in greater detail,

Epilogue and Transition

Two Texts, Many Readers

Buddhist texts added Western readers to their audience more than a century ago. This new readership brings additional voices to our conversation with the sutras and with those who transmit them. As I read the two Sukhavativyuha Sutras, I see in them not only documents of Buddhist history and statements of Buddhist doctrine, not only claims to religious truth, but also works of the literary imagination. It is impossible for me to read them without thinking of Dante and the Western literary tradition of journeys to the underworld and visions of Heaven and Hell. I am also forced to think about utopias, about earthly and heavenly paradises, and about their social, as well as their literary settings.

This is not to say that these mostly secular perspectives necessarily compete with or displace other readings and other uses of the two sutras. After all, Western traditions have their religious roots, and in the case of these universal themes of the imagination the historical and thematic connections with religion are obvious. Moreover, in their secular and religious forms, talking, telling, and writing about the afterlife are part of our effort to make sense of death and of whatever voices and visions we feel come from beyond death, or from a life greater than death.

For this Western reader, these themes cannot be separated from the universal history of human preoccupation with the fantastic, with dreams and visions, and with the literary and performative manifestations of this preoccupation. Thus, I like to imagine these two sutras as somewhere between the work of poets, visionaries, and theologians. Although we, in Asia as well as in the West, tend to overemphasize the doctrinal content of Buddhist sutras, traditional commentaries on the

sutras did not ignore their literary nature, although I doubt very much the classical commentators would have thought of a sutra as comparable to the creation of a secular poet—a thought that comes naturally to me. As far as visions and dreams are concerned, they remain to this day the most powerful proof the believer has that there is in fact a perfectly pure buddha-field in the western reaches of the universe.

But, how many readings of a text can there be? The very idea of a translation brings to mind hopes of discovering an immutable and unambiguous meaning, hidden behind an equally immutable source text. The critique of this simplistic assumption could fill many pages, but I hope the preceding taste of the two sutras already begins to show how complex and multilayered are these source texts. The preceding translations, introductions, and notes have pointed in the direction of a world of multiple allusions and images, and they have as well touched tangentially on the parallel worlds of the interpreters.

For every aspect of the two sutras there are many more subplots and subimages. A purified field, for instance, makes sense only in a universe populated with world systems of a particular kind. For the field is defined in contrast and comparison to various aspects of the standard structure and content of a world system. Because these parallel worlds can only be approached by taking side trips from the one-dimensional process of reading a text, they are in some ways like the modern “hypertext” and require multiple journeys away from and back to the motifs of the sutras. As an introduction to the two sutras, the present study plots, suggests, or highlights some of these side trips in the notes to the translations and in the appendices.

Yet, the reader also seeks a sense of unity, a return to the apparent linearity of the text, and a sense of closure and rational order. It is in part the task of the interpreter or commentator to provide this unity by constructing a meaning for “the text.” The interpretation of the two sutras presented in the introductions to Part 1 was an attempt to construct one such unity based on what I believe the grammatical and narrative structure of the texts suggest about the other, less cohesive world of multiple images and aspirations. I also strived to show how apparently disparate beliefs—such as merit transference and faith—were connected by a logic that is comprehensible even to the non-believer.

My interpretation was of course also based on what I know of similar literature, so that the purported internal unity and context of the two sutras is in many ways something that I discover in an external context and in my idea of a genre. But these external contexts can be engaged in varying manners and degrees. In Part 1 I bracketed, insofar as possible, the many meanings that the texts have acquired through the conscious analysis of the commentator. In particular, I reduced to a minimum my use of traditional East Asian understandings of the two

sutras. Insofar as possible, I have tried to avoid relying on the learned tradition that I have called, for lack of a better word, scholastic Mahayana Buddhism. I have tried to demonstrate the extent to which these two sutras offer a richly textured and complex world of imagery and religious hope that shares much with other forms of Mahayana and non-Mahayana Buddhism, but which is also unique and in many ways different from the religion of normative Mahayana doctrine. There are obvious overlaps and necessary connections that help us understand why the two sutras came to form part of the Mahayana corpus of authoritative texts. But there are also differences and gaps that suggest to us a genesis on the margins of the Buddhism of the scholastic elites. As the reader approaches now the Chinese versions, I hope to maintain the same distance from traditional exegetical literature. But it will be much more difficult to do so, and the influence of these traditions will begin to show.

Unfortunately we really do not know much about the early history of our two sutras or about their early cultural and social contexts. The Sanskrit texts were actually not preserved in India, so that we have no way of placing them in time or space with any degree of accuracy. The emphasis of the present study on the texts themselves leaves out, partly due to ignorance, partly due to a desire to offer a fresh reading of the two sutras, three important aspects of these texts: use, representation or performance, and commentary or interpretation. Of the first two aspects, use and representation, we know precious little. I assume, for the purpose of imagining as I read, that in India and Central Asia the texts were used both doctrinally and liturgically. In other words, I assume that representation and rehearsal were an integral part of use.

Of the third aspect, interpretation, the evidence is also scanty. But there is enough to form a certain picture of the ideals and structures that defined Buddhism in contrast to other belief systems of ancient India. Because of what we know about these ideas and because of a long tradition of Asian and Western modern writings on Buddhism, we are all affected by preconceptions and scenarios, narratives that continue to live and act in the back of our minds even when we try to reject them, block them out or, as I have claimed to do, “bracket” them.

Unfortunately, we know of no commentaries on either of the two Sukhavativyūha sutras that could be placed with any certainty on Indian soil. The only commentary that tradition attributes to an Indian author is a small treatise of questionable attribution and origin, Vasubandhu's *Treatise on the Pure Land* (which will be summarized presently). We do not know if this dearth of exegesis is because no commentary was ever written or because the commentaries were lost.¹ The net effect is that we cannot be certain as to how the two sutras were viewed, interpreted, and used in India.

But we know enough about Indian scholastic theory to have at least a rough image of what belief in buddha-fields and bodhisattva vows may have entailed to the theologically inclined. As one last, albeit cursory, suggestion of still another path to understanding the two sutras in India, and as a bridge to their Chinese manifestations, I would like to outline some general features of what may have been Indian theological reflection on the genre of text and belief to which the two sutras belong.

I believe it is likely that interpretation in India went beyond what is now preserved in actual commentaries or scholastic writings. But I also assume that the texts could be read or heard in ancient India as they can be read today, as a multilayered tapestry with many points of entry, so that no single commentary exhausted all possibilities of understanding. I also believe that much of what we find in the commentarial tradition is an attempt to make the sutras fit in polemical contexts that are likewise limited to particular times. Yet, these efforts at contextualizing and rationalizing are in many ways like the efforts behind the book that the reader now holds before his or her eyes.

Use and Interpretation

In considering what little evidence we have of a commentarial literature in India, we cannot overlook the evidence of other traces of Buddhism: the nonscholastic, what has been called "popular." These are materials, documentary and archeological, that bear witness to the existence of ritual, devotional, and nonscholastic forms of Buddhism. Whether some or all of these practices were "popular" (whatever the word may ultimately mean), or whether they formed part of one single system, is not as important as the fact that these practices existed parallel to the doctrinal systems of the scholastics, and that the views of the religion held by the practitioners of these other forms of Buddhism may have been different from those of the scholastics.

For instance, we know of the existence of liturgies that included hymns of praise, invocation of deities, and prayers for graceful benediction and benefaction. We know of the existence of litanies that included invocations of the name of a particular buddha or bodhisattva. We know of belief in and devotion towards a number of buddhas and bodhisattvas, many of whom were located in different purified buddha-fields in distant worlds.

It is reasonable to assume that as living religious practices these forms of Buddhism may have benefited from cross-fertilization with the systematic theology of the scholastics. It is also reasonable to assume that many of the scholastics practiced in their private and public devotions at least some of these so-called popular forms of religious-

ity. But it is equally reasonable to assume that these practices could have a life independent from the systematics of Mahayana Buddhism—that is, a life that was oblivious to or ignorant of the Mahayana scholastic theory.

Buddha-fields, Buddha-bodies

Thus, speculation on the nature of the buddha-fields did not always follow a path parallel to that of the sutras that supposedly inspired it. In fact, it is not always clear which texts are supposed to inspire which speculation. This much is certain: some sutras clearly show that their compilers were familiar with the bulk of the scholastic terminology, and scholastic treatises try to bolster their positions with scriptural references. In fact, as noted before, the sutras often turn the abstract terminology of metaphysical and buddhological reflection into literary tropes and commonplaces. Yet, systematic writings on the buddha-fields contained materials that are not necessarily relevant to an understanding of the role of belief in the purified buddha-fields as a faith, much less relevant to understanding sutras as religious texts.²

The scholastic writings nevertheless suggest some of the lines of thought that the theologically inclined interpreters of Mahayana Buddhism followed in trying to understand the vow to purify a buddha-field. They are also attempts to place buddha-field belief into some kind of order—explaining, for example, what are the connections between a world system and a buddha-field (see Table 2 in the Appendix).

What little remains of this sort of speculation is from the scholastic literature of the Yogachara (*Yogācāra*) school. Three major works touch, albeit tangentially, on the subject in some detail: the Mahayanasangraha (*Mahāyānasangraha*) of Asanga (Asaṅga; ca. 350 C.E. [?]), the commentary on the Buddhahūmi Sutra (*Buddhabhūmi Sūtra*) by Śīlabhadra (Śīlabhadra; ca. 600 C.E. [?]), and a compendium of Yogachara teachings attributed to Dharmapala (Dharmapāla; ca. 650 C.E.) and known in the West as the *Siddhi*.³ None of these refer explicitly to the two Sukhavativyūha sutras, but they attempt to present a systematic picture of buddha-field theory. They are, above all, attempts to make sense of this belief system in terms of the liberation theories and the buddhology of the scholastics. The third of these three works, the *Siddhi*, for instance, tries to explain variant accounts of buddha-fields by presenting a complete classification of fields (summarized in Table 3 in the Appendix).

According to this classification, the purification of a buddha-field corresponds to the purity of the buddha presiding over it. The type of living being in the field also corresponds to this degree of purity. In this theory, however, the correlation between the person of the buddha and

his field depends on an abstract "buddhology" foreign to the conception of a buddha present in the two sutras. According to the *Siddhi*, the purity of a buddha is defined by the type of "body" he possesses. This theory of "buddha-bodies" proposes that with awakening comes the capacity to generate or cultivate at least three types of spiritual persons, all three coexisting in the spiritual person of a buddha. First, at the highest level of purity and holiness, a buddha will be reality itself—his whole person being identical with the truth he has realized. Accordingly, at this level buddha-field is synonymous with buddha-body.

This identity with the absolute does not preclude possession of a personality that is somehow perceivable as form, color, sound. Thus, the second buddha-body is one such "form-body" shaped as the marvelous spiritual body that bodhisattvas perceive in their visions. This is a marvelous body adorned with superhuman features, such as the halo and the golden color. A third body, another "form-body," is a more mundane human body: the buddha remains a human being of sorts, with the capacity to behave like a human being and assume a human form, even though this form may be regarded sometimes as illusory or as a creation of the magical powers of a buddha.⁴ These bodies are constituted not by the physical and mental elements that constitute normal human bodies, but by special qualities or virtues that define a buddha (*buddha-dharma*).⁵ These are abstract components of an ideal person, as well as ideal descriptions of human virtues.

There is of course nothing like this in the sutras, but the assumption that buddhas can continue to appear in human and superhuman forms in these buddha-bodies allows the scholastics to suggest some kind of putatively rational explanation for three mysteries: the marvels of purified buddha-fields like the Land of Bliss, the fact that buddhas who are supposed to have left forever the cycle of rebirth continue to act in that cycle, and the appearance of buddhas and paradises in the visions and imagination of believers. The sutras are not interested in removing the mystery. The scholastics, on the other hand, want a system; they want clarity, and they want to preserve the spiritual hierarchy implicit in the contrast between the pure spirituality of a buddha in nirvana and the sheer materiality of visionary faith. They therefore propose that the highest field is the buddha-body itself. This is the Buddha as Dharma, and paradise as being-buddha. Yet, a buddha has also the capacity to share this ultimate reality with others who cannot yet be one with Dharma. When a buddha shares his presence, without establishing a full identity between his perfection and that of his field, the field is less sublime. A number of logical alternatives come to mind, and the scholastics have listed most of them. The field could be "mixed"—partly pure, partly impure. In this case the buddha-body

appearing before living beings is a distant transformation or an illusory image of the real thing. Living beings in this field, although saintly, are only beginning bodhisattvas and non-bodhisattvas; their vision of the buddha is very imperfect (see Table 3). But other fields may exist between these extremes. In the intermediary ground between Field of Dharma Essence and Mixed Transformation Field, there are other pure fields. The Buddha's Body of Shared Glory can be seen in fields that exist only for a buddha's own enjoyment and in fields that exist only for the enjoyment of other buddhas and the most advanced bodhisattvas. In others, one can see a more perfect image of the Transformation Body. These are peopled by bodhisattvas who still have not reached the tenth stage of the bodhisattva path.

The *Siddhi* does not say on which level is Amitabha's Land of Bliss. Although other sources would suggest that Sukhavati is a land peopled by advanced bodhisattvas, the Longer Sutra is not clear on this point.⁶

The Vows

In addition to this scant and indirect evidence on what Indian philosophers and scholastics might have thought about the message of the two sutras, we can also risk using materials of questionable Indian ancestry. Three other works that played a major role in China, and that East Asian tradition claims were composed in India, refer to Amitabha's Land of Bliss and his bodhisattva vows. Two of these works are attributed to the ubiquitous Nagarjuna (Nāgārjuna; ca. 250 C.E. [?]); the third work is attributed to the equally famous Vasubandhu (Vasubandhu; ca. 350 C.E. [?]). Unfortunately the authenticity and Indian origin of these works has been called into question, which renders uncertain the setting in time and space of the following remarks.

The first of these works, a commentary on the Larger Sutra on the Perfection of Wisdom known as the *Dazhidu-lun*, contains perhaps one of the oldest analytical reflections on the doctrine of the buddha-fields.⁷ Several passages reflect on the nature of the buddha-fields, the buddhas that preside over them, and the brightness of their halo. The *Dazhidu-lun* also seems to regard Amitabha's Land of Bliss as the paradigm or prototype for all buddha-fields, although by no means the only one, nor the only one worthy of reverence.

Although the *Dazhidu-lun* does not contain any exegetical reflections regarding the two Sukhavativyuha sutras themselves, it is clearly cognizant of the belief systems that form the underlying doctrinal structure of these sutras. It is also worth noting that the author of this analysis regarded the vow (or the vows) as the pivotal force in the attainment of buddhahood and in the generation of a purified buddha-field. The vow derives its power, moreover, not only from the virtue of

the aspirant and the sincerity of the aspiration, but also from the power of the bodhisattva's merit transference. This conception, which I have presented as central to the doctrine of both sutras, is also at the core of the second of the scholastic texts mentioned above as being of questionable attribution and uncertain origin, Nagarjuna's commentary on the Sutra of the Ten Stages.⁸

Although Chinese Pure Land thinkers tended to focus on a few lines in this work that speak of an "easy practice," namely that of devoted aspiration to rebirth in the Land of Bliss, the bulk of the material on buddha-fields in this text is in the form of poetical confessions of faith centering on the vow. If the text is in fact reflective of Indian thinking on the path of faith, we could say that this text too is a statement on the central role of this form of Buddhism in the literate traditions of Indian Buddhism. It is certainly not a confirmation of an exclusive practice of faith in Amitabha, much less of a practice based on the recitation of "the Name." But it is a text devoted to the confirmation of the power of the vow, and, even more important for our understanding of the sutras, it is also a statement on the power of merit transference. Merit transference is here above all the inversion of the flow of merit: by dedicating my limited merit to rebirth in the Land of Bliss, I am able to share in Amitabha's own transference of unlimited merit.

The third of the three texts of purported but questionable Indian origin also confirms this doctrinal theme. The text is in fact the only surviving commentary on either of the two sutras that may be of Indian origin. It is a commentary on the Longer Sutra known in China as the *Treatise on the Pure Land* (*Jingtu-lun*), and attributed to the Indian Master Vasubandhu.⁹ Regardless of its origin, the text is important not only because of the high regard in which it is held in China, but also as a valuable source on the practical contexts of the Longer Sutra.

Vasubandhu recognizes five approaches (the "Five Gates") to the practice of aspiration to rebirth in Amitabha's purified field. They all center on the principles outlined above: the vow and the dedication of merit as two aspects of a single practice and sacred reality. But these principles appear here as an integral part of five styles of practice that occur elsewhere in the literature of Mahayana Buddhism. These are practices that we recognize immediately as part of almost every Mahayana liturgy. Some of them are in fact described in the sutras themselves—albeit in idealized or stylized form.

The first practice, or gate, is veneration with the body, that is, bowing and prostrating oneself and, presumably, worshiping with offerings. The second gate is veneration with speech—praising the buddhas. Notice that both of these practices are at the center of life in the Land of Bliss according to both Sukhavativyuha sutras. The third

approach is the vow itself, mental veneration, but also intentionality and direction of action. The vow is here understood broadly as the vow of the bodhisattva and specifically as the believer's aspiration to being reborn in the purified field of Amitabha. Again, both forms of practice are described in the sutras in idealized form.

The *Treatise on the Pure Land*, however, is not a sutra. As a scholastic treatise, it makes use of set lists of practices and principles to give order to the ideals of religious life. In the particular case of the third gate, it is seen as equivalent to a form of cultivation of calm (*śamatha*), that is a one-pointed, serene concentration of mind. This is certainly a novel idea perhaps derived from the reference in the sutras to the recollection of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, or to the constant bringing to mind of the aspiration itself.¹⁰ The aspiration of the vow is single-minded, and this single-mindedness is mindfulness.

The aspiration is further strengthened or cultivated by a process of meditative observation, the fourth gate. It is clear from the text that this is some form of mental "examination" or "review" of the marvelous qualities of the Buddha presiding over the Land of Bliss, of the buddha-field itself, and of the bodhisattvas inhabiting that field. It also appears that Vasubandhu sees this practice as somehow equivalent to the analytic review of dharmas, that is, a type of so-called insight meditation. However, the practice of this reviewing is best described as an exercise in narrative imagination, for it consists primarily in reviewing mentally the description of the virtues and ornaments of Buddha, purified buddha-field, and bodhisattvas. The exact nature of this mental review remains obscure. But insofar as we may regard the Longer Sutra as the basis for the *Treatise*, and the latter as an attempt to explicate the sutra, Vasubandhu's "meditation" appears to be a type of rehearsal or reenactment. The believer repeats in a manner of speaking Dharmakara's quest, collecting (by recollection) the virtues of his land.

Similarly, the fifth gate reflects Dharmakara's transference of merit. Ritually, this gate is the well-known practice of dedication of merit; but, insofar as it is a sharing of the merit of the content of the ritual—namely, the qualities of the Land of Bliss—it is also an act of faith (trust that the Land of Bliss is attainable) and an act of sharing. The latter aspect of the dedication also echoes Dharmakara's own vows and sharing of merit and, therefore, his compassion.

Merit and Effort

Vasubandhu's treatise may be read differently in East Asia. Different emphases arise when the text is seen through the eyes of Chinese exegetes and Japanese reformers, or when it is seen in the practical contexts of Korean or Japanese religious life. But the variety of possible closures to this text speaks in part to what it leaves unsaid. The *Treatise*,

notwithstanding its scholastic neatness, shares the ambiguity of the sutras with regard to merit and effort, and, therefore, leaves many doors open. On the one hand, the five gates are a form of devotional prayer, on the other they are a form of meditation. They express a hope for redemption and a conviction of achieved liberation, yet they also set down a path of practice that requires dedication, effort, and a sense of direction.

In most parts of Asia, this combination of devotion and meditation, surrender and dedicated effort permeates most of the theological and liturgical reflection that is occasioned by the two sutras and their promise of rebirth in the Land of Bliss. The coexistence of these polarities in experience and rhetoric, in practice and theory, is probably behind the fascinating combination of reflections on emptiness and intense devotion that one finds throughout the history of Mahayana Buddhism. The combination is further complicated by local variations of formal meditation and metaphysical reflection. It is also complicated by the coexistence of belief in multiple buddhas and buddha-fields—a multiplicity that is paralleled in scripture by a variety of literary sources.

In Tibet and Nepal, the competing practices and texts are from traditions that do not see themselves as rooted in the two sutras. In East Asia, on the other hand, the two sutras, together with most of the fragments of Indian commentarial tradition discussed in the preceding paragraphs, formed the core of an identity for a variety of traditions—textual, theological, liturgical—that have come to be known as “Pure Land,” but which I pluralize to signal the complex intertwining of its many roots and branches.

The next section opens Part 2 of this book with an introduction to the Chinese translations of the two sutras in which I present a minute sampling of the complex East Asian traditions within which the sutras have existed for more than fifteen hundred years. Like this epilogue, the introduction to the Chinese translations is meant to serve as a reminder that translations can only scratch the surface of a text and its many meanings.

Part 2

THE CHINESE VERSIONS

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATIONS

Introduction to the Chinese Versions

The Two Texts

The two Sukhavativyuha Sutras have been preserved for us in several ancient translations that have become in some ways more important than the Indian versions. So far as we can tell, the influence of the two sutras in India can hardly be compared to their far-reaching influence in East Asia, where they were known exclusively through Chinese translations. What is more, the living traditions that preserve some form of the ancient belief in Amitabha's paradise all rely on translated versions, primarily in Chinese and Tibetan. Today, the Sanskrit texts come to us as documents without a living context. Except for remnants of devotion to Amitabha in Nepal, we have only a fragmentary and chronologically indeterminate literary context on which to base our interpretations of the Sanskrit texts or our understanding of their use in South Asia.

The same cannot be said of the most influential among the extant versions—those that were made in China roughly between 250 C.E. and 400 C.E. and in Tibet between the ninth and tenth centuries C.E. The record is still incomplete and problematic, but we know more about these translations and their use than we do about the Indian prototypes with which the traditions of devotion to Amitabha began. Comparison among each other and against the existing Sanskrit and Tibetan versions also allows us to appreciate the extent to which each translation is an interpretation, and the basis for the continuation and expansion of traditions of belief, practice, and exegesis.

In the following pages I present free translations of the two most influential Chinese versions. The most widely used of these two is the translation of the Shorter Sutra by Kumarajīva (Kumārajīva), which was completed ca. 402 C.E. This text is known as the "Amita Sutra"

(*Amituo-jing* in Chinese) or, simply, "The Small Sutra" (*Xiao-jing*).¹ Its brevity and the elegance of its prose have made this text a much-loved classic, widely used for devotional purposes. Even now one can hear daily recitations of the whole text in many temples in China, Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, and North and South America.

The Longer Sutra is by virtue of its length and narrative complexity less widely read, and only short segments are used for ritual recitation. It carries, however, much more doctrinal authority than the Shorter Sutra. One version of the Longer Sutra has gained special currency as an authoritative source for the "doctrines of faith." This version is usually known as "The Large Sutra" (*Dajing* in Chinese), or the "Sutra on the Buddha of Measureless Life" (*Wuliangshou-jing*).² It has been traditionally regarded as the work of a little-known Central Asian translator called in Chinese Kang Sengkai, that is, Sengkai of Sogdiana. His name, Sengkai, is sometimes reconstructed as Sanghavarman (Sanghavarman) in Sanskrit.

If the attribution to Sanghavarman were correct, this version would date from ca. 252 C.E.; but modern scholarship has questioned this attribution. It now seems more likely that the so-called Sanghavarman translation is at least a reworking by members of the translation workshop of the famous Tang Dynasty translator Buddhahadra (359–429 C.E.). Be that as it may, the text is in some places archaic, showing traces of several stages of revision, and occasionally borrowing phrases and verses from earlier translations. It is lengthy and cumbersome, and the style is at times inelegant. But its mythic and doctrinal complexity have ensured a preferred position for this text over all other versions, especially among commentators and theologians.

The authority of the Longer Sutra within East Asian Pure Land traditions is unquestionable. Still, its interpretation is complicated by the existence of a plurality of sources of authority. For instance, it is also customary to rely on a comparative reading of the Shorter and the Longer Sutras. Scholars and specialists in doctrine have also used for their doctrinal pronouncements other Chinese translations of the Longer Sutra (of which only five, including Sanghavarman's, survive to this day). Of the other four surviving translations, two have often been used by traditional interpreters as critical checks on Sanghavarman's version. The oldest of these is the translation attributed to Zhi Loujiachen (fl. 167–186 C.E.), which is respected for its putative antiquity.³ The younger of these two translations is the version by Bodhiruchi (Bodhiruci; 693–713 C.E.), valued for its clarity.

The existence of multiple translations offered Chinese Buddhists the opportunity for interpretation based on a variety of sources and therefore removed in part the illusion of a single text. Moreover, many other texts were translated and brought together into vast scriptural

collections. The growth of the corpus of Chinese Buddhist texts provided additional, and conflicting, voices. Some sort of order had to be imposed; the plurality of sources and interpretations had to be controlled by decisions regarding which texts were to be read together or in comparison to each other. Gradually, some texts came to be regarded as properly belonging within a canon of Pure Land faith. Some of these decisions resulted in open or loose associations that allowed for connections with textual traditions that were not explicitly focused on devotion to Amitabha. Such was the Tiantai (Tendai in Japanese) use of the Sutra on the Samadhi of Direct Encounter (Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra) as the inspiration for a highly valued and influential cycle of meditations on the Pure Land. A further example of a loose canonical strategy is the frequent association of legendary and documentary sources on Guanyin (Avalokiteshvara) with faith in rebirth in the Pure Land.

But certain canonical compilations emphasized an exclusive, or nearly exclusive, faith in Amitabha. For instance, Sanghavarman's Longer Sutra, together with Kumarajiva's translation of the Shorter Sutra, were often segregated from the rest of the Mahayana scriptural corpus into small collections that became independent sets of authoritative texts on the Buddhism of faith. In China, for instance, the two sutras came to form part of a set of five "Sutras on the Pure Land," namely, (1) Kumarajiva's Shorter Sutra, (2) Sanghavarman's Longer Sutra, (3) the *Guanwuliangshou-jing* or "Sutra on Contemplating the Buddha of Measureless Life,"⁴ (4) the "Sutra on the Vows of Samantabhadra,"⁵ and (5) a short segment from the Shurangama Sutra (*Śūraṅgama Sūtra*) in which the Bodhisattva Mahasathamaprapta (Mahāsthāmaprapta) praises the practice of recollecting the Buddha Amitabha.⁶ Occasionally this last text is omitted, leaving a set of four. It was more common, however, to append a sixth text to the set of five, namely, Vasubandhu's "Treatise on the Pure Land" (*Jingtu-lun*).⁷ Although this is not properly a sutra, the fact that according to tradition this is the only Indian commentary on Pure Land sutras renders it a priceless gem.

In all of these canonical compilations of Mahayana texts, much weight is given to the third text in the list, the *Guanwuliangshou-jing*. This sutra has been known in the West for approximately one hundred years under the title "The Meditation Sutra"—more recently as "The Visualization Sutra." In China, the Meditation Sutra served as a model for meditational practices connected with Pure Land belief, but it also provided arguments for a faith-centered Buddhist practice. Additionally, at times the Meditation Sutra seems to carry more authority among Chinese commentators than the two Sukhavativyuha sutras.

In Japan, this sutra provided many of the doctrinal categories and

dogmatic lists used in Pure Land theology. Japanese believers often read the Shorter and the Longer Sutras together with the Meditation Sutra as a set that is supposed to represent a single doctrinal system. Although the works of the commentators continue to carry as much authority as the "scriptural" sources, it is common for Japanese to refer to this set of three as the "Three Sutras of Pure Land," or the "Tripartite Sutra of the Pure Land" and to present it as the ultimate source for Pure Land doctrine. In what remains of this introduction, the phrase "the two sutras," by now all-too familiar to my readers, will be displaced occasionally by the phrase "the three sutras." In this way I will signal to the reader whenever a particular doctrine or interpretation may derive from an integrated or comparative reading of these three works. This will distinguish a certain type of exegetical concept of textual and canonical unity from the concept followed in the majority of the interpretations proposed in this book, which are based on the reading of either one or both of the two sutras in relative isolation.

I have chosen not to include the Meditation Sutra in the present study, not only because it does not have a corresponding Sanskrit text, but because it is most likely not an Indian text at all. Furthermore, the grouping of the three sutras as a canonical unit is a late development (most likely from thirteenth-century Japan). It has not been recognized across all traditions that adopted belief in Amitabha and his Pure Land. Additionally, the Meditation Sutra was not the only source for interpretive control on the two sutras (consider, for instance, the importance of the Sutra on the Samadhi of Direct Encounter). This is not to say that the study of the Meditation Sutra is not important in our attempts to understand the Shorter and the Longer Sutra. In their East Asian contexts, their interpretation to a great extent depends on the Meditation Sutra. In some ways the Meditation Sutra may be seen as a sort of commentary on the other two sutras—representing a tradition of interpretation and practice that remains influential to this day.

Dates and Contents

In content, the Chinese translations selected for the present study do not differ radically from their Sanskrit counterparts. Most likely, the Chinese translators did not have access to exactly the same texts that today survive in Sanskrit, but their Indian sources must have been variants of the texts now represented by the surviving Sanskrit versions.⁸ In other words, we can assume strong links, perhaps continuities between the existing versions of these sutras, but we cannot assume an identity between any of these texts.

As already pointed out, Kumarajiva's translation is the more elegant of the two. It is also closer to the extant Sanskrit text. The other

surviving translation of this text, by the translator-pilgrim Xuanzang (602–664 C.E.), is more detailed and slightly longer than Kumarajiva's. At times it appears to be a commentary glossing technical terms that might seem obscure to the Chinese reader. Yet, it is substantially the same as the surviving Sanskrit text and Kumarajiva's translation.

Sanghavarman's version, on the other hand, differs from its Sanskrit counterpart in a number of ways: the order of the narrative and the argument deviate, sometimes only on minor points, sometimes in major ways; differences in content occur throughout, and range from a regrouping and rearrangement of important themes (in the content and structure of the verse portions, for instance, and in the vows), to significant omissions and additions. The parallels, however, are more and stronger than the divergences, so that our understanding of one version may still benefit from our reading of the other.

Two long passages in Sanghavarman's version have no correspondence in the Sanskrit (or, for that matter, in the Tibetan) versions. These passages are probably "interpolations," but we have no way of knowing for certain today where and when they were added to the text. The first of these passages is the long description of the life of a typical (or, rather, archetypical) bodhisattva (Sg §5–22). This passage takes some of the reader's attention from the figure of Shakyamuni and highlights Dharmakara's career as a bodhisattva. It is only found, outside Sanghavarman's text, in Bodhiruchi's translation.

The second major interpolation is the passage on the "Five Great Evils" (Sg §160–205), which may be a Chinese statement regarding morals and the consequences of sin. It has very close correspondences in the texts of Zhi Qian and Zhi Loujiachen. In the context of the sutra and its East Asian interpretations, this long passage is often read as a reference to the decline of the Dharma. In other words, it is not read (as I suggest we do) as a digression on and a reaffirmation of the importance of effort and self-cultivation, but as a statement of the helplessness of common human beings in an age in which the Buddha's Dharma is in decay.⁹

Dharmakara's vows, in one form or another, occur in all versions. Much attention has been devoted to the differences in content and ordering between the forty-seven vows of the Sanskrit version and the forty-eight of the Chinese.¹⁰ But there are other, more interesting differences among the various versions. For instance, the earliest translations—those attributed to Zhi Qian and Loujiachen—do not seem to know of at least twenty of the vows in the version of Sanghavarman. Unquestionable omissions include vows 26–34 and 37–48 (Chinese numbering).¹¹

Minor differences in order and content occur throughout, including differences in the description of the Pure Land itself. These differ-

ences can be articulated in tabular form (see Table 4 in the Appendix). Such tabulations, however, should not be taken to suggest a relative chronology. In the first place, one must consider that differences among these versions may represent differences among older source texts. Secondly, we no longer can tell the degree to which those earlier sources developed in parallel. Thirdly, a gross tabulation of this kind cannot capture important differences of detail—for instance, Faxian's thirty-six vows are often more elaborate and doctrinally more advanced than Sanghavarman's forty-eight. The first section of the prologue (SV §2–3, Sg §3) is more developed in the Sanskrit and Tibetan versions than in any of the other versions, yet the last section of the prologue, the list of bodhisattvas (SV §4, Sg §4) is the shortest in Sanskrit, the longest in Loujiachen, the second longest in Sanghavarman and Bodhiruchi, and is missing from Zhi Qian and Faxian.

Moreover, the traditional attributions of authorship for most of the Chinese versions are inconsistent and of questionable validity, so that it is difficult to tell the exact chronological order of the translations themselves, let alone the source texts used for those translations.¹² The opinion of modern scholars is still divided, but a consensus seems to be developing—under the influence of the most respected authority, Kōtatsu Fujita—that the relative chronology of the Chinese versions is approximately as follows: Zhi Qian, Loujiachen, Bodhiruchi and Sanghavarman (exact relationship between these two is debatable), and Faxian.

One thing is clear, however, and that is that the earliest four Chinese translations of the Longer Sutra present a picture of the Buddhism of faith in Amitabha that is in many ways still like that of the Sanskrit version of the Longer Sutra. Missing are the speculations of the Indian scholastics on buddha-bodies and path theory and the speculations of Chinese scholastics on faith. These versions of the sutra are still in that shadowy land between merit and faith that characterizes the Indian versions. One can speak, as I have previously done, of a certain ambivalence towards merit and faith, as long as this choice of words does not presuppose an expectation alien to the spiritual world of the sutras, the expectation that merit and faith have to be in tension or contrast.

The extent to which this assumption may have been foreign to the early compilers of this literature comes across clearly in a passage from Zhi Qian's translation of the Longer Sutra. In the opening lines to the section on the Five Evils one can feel a distinctive moral tone, a push for merit and effort combined with faith and reliance in the saving power of buddhas:

Buddha said to Ajita and the other bodhisattvas, and to Indra, King of the Gods, and to the human beings present in that assem-

bly: "I say to you all that those who aspire to be reborn in the Land of Amita Buddha, even if they cannot practice the highest spiritual vigor, cannot concentrate in meditation, and cannot keep the teachings of the sutras and the vinaya, should practice good conduct for it is most essential. First, they should not take life; second, they should not steal; third, they should not engage in unlawful sexual relations or desire another man's wife; fourth, they should not practice deceit; fifth, they should not drink intoxicating drinks; sixth, they should not speak with double tongue; seventh, they should not pronounce slanderous words; eighth, they should engage in idle speech; ninth, they should not fall prey to envy; and tenth, they should not fall prey to greed. They should not cling obstinately to their opinions. They should not give in to hatred. They should not fall into ignorant delusion. . . . They should practice filial piety and obedience. They should feel a sincere single-minded faith. They should believe in the words of the Buddha's sutras. They should practice good conduct with a deep faith, that in a future existence they will enjoy the fruit of their merit.

If you accept this in this way, so that this Dharma shall not perish, you will be able to be reborn in the land of Amita Buddha, according to your aspiration.

Keep days of fast and observance with a single, pure mind, constantly day and night bringing to mind your aspiration to being reborn in the Land of Amita Buddha. If you practice in this manner for ten days and ten nights without interruption, I, who feel pity and compassion for you, will make sure that you all are reborn in the Land of Amita Buddha.¹³

Use and Interpretation

The willingness to accept both sides of the dilemma of faith and effort, grace and works, permeates this literature and much of the traditions that developed around these texts. There are of course notable exceptions—and I will continue to remind the reader of these exceptions. However, when we look at the two sutras from the point of view of their form and content, we are reminded of those features of the tradition that were not the exceptions, the tradition in all its complexity and all its accommodations to the tensions that arise in the encounter between faith and morals. In this process, the Chinese versions of the two sutras, particularly those of Kumarajiva and Sanghavarman, have a long history of ritual and exegetical use that is richly documented. They also formed the scriptural focus for a number of religious movements and denominational organizations, some of which survive to this day.

The earliest interpreters in China attempted to understand the two

sutras in the context of a normative Mahayana, in which the ideals of effort and merit and of an active meditation practice still played a central role. This was the case in Tibet throughout the history of the interpretation and use of the two sutras. In this view of the two sutras, the aspiration to be reborn in the Pure Land is one of many other aspirations open to Mahayana Buddhists. It is one of the easiest aspirations and one of the simplest practices, but it still requires effort and dedication, and it is still part of a complex of practices that are seen as equally valid, if not complementary. Rebirth in the Pure Land, moreover, is conceived either as a preliminary to the full practice of the bodhisattva path or as somehow equivalent to, if not identical with, the visions experienced through meditation. The Meditation Sutra may be seen as a text expressing one version of this view:¹⁴ the vision of the Pure Land is granted by the Buddha to helpless living beings as an act of grace, but acceptance of this vision and its full realization require effort, which is defined as a type of meditation.¹⁵

In many ways the two sutras remain part of a large stock of beliefs from which Buddhism draws its symbols and practices, sometimes with a clear denominational consciousness, sometimes as part of a generalized system of beliefs that cannot be characterized as specific to any Buddhist group. It is in this role that the two sutras and the doctrines associated with them have contributed the most to the history of Buddhist practices and beliefs. It has been argued, in fact, that belief in Amitabha and the aspiration to rebirth in his purified field was one such generalized belief already in Indian soil.

East Asian Traditions

This broader or generalized system of beliefs continues to exist not only in China, Korea, and Tibet, but even in Japan, where the historical importance of the development of denominations around the authority of the "three sutras" tends to eclipse the important role of the more diffuse belief in Amitabha and his paradise. It is safe to say that the vast majority of the persons who have believed in Amitabha and aspired to his Pure Land have been associated with such diffuse or generalized beliefs. It is to this set of common, but amorphous, beliefs that I often refer in the course of this study as "belief in Amitabha" or "the Buddhism of faith," or, when referring to East Asia, as "Pure Land."

Some individuals and communities, however, describe themselves as being exclusively devoted to Amitabha, and among such believers some belong to denominations that refer to themselves as Pure Land denominations. Such self-referential characterizations of belief in Amitabha tend to overemphasize the distinctive or exclusive character of these practices in the history of belief in Amitabha. But self-referen-

tial characterizations are also normative, and various groups, particularly in Japan, have in fact developed exclusive Pure Land practices. Japanese Pure Land practices are themselves found in a variety of sectarian, ritual, and doctrinal contexts. They are complex and are interwoven with more diffuse beliefs and practices of various forms of the Buddhism of faith. But a presentation of the *two* sutras that ignored altogether their position within the *three* sutras, within the canon of five Pure Land "sutras," and within the traditions that claim a distinctive or exclusive Pure Land path, would not do justice to the two sutras and the rich traditions they have helped maintain. I therefore wish to offer a cursory examination of a few highlights of this particular approach to the message of the sutras.

In their scholastic manifestations, the exegetical and theological traditions that grew around the three sutras drew heavily on what may be termed, for lack of a better word, "selective reading"—that is, they focused on the close reading of segments of text that served as aphoristic statements of belief, proof texts, or the focus for theological wrangling. The most important and popular among the key passages of the two sutras that are studied by the scholastic traditions of East Asian Pure Land are listed in Tables 7a, 7b, and 8 in the Appendix. These tables should in themselves give a sense of the ordered universe that the commentators seek in the selective reading of proof texts.

This is a manner of reading the sutras that may seem distant from the way the texts are used in liturgy or as sources of pictorial and narrative representations, and it is also distant from much of the analysis of the two sutras presented in the introduction to the Sanskrit texts. Yet, this is indeed a key mode of reading in the Buddhist tradition. And, I would argue, it would be a serious mistake to assume that the person who searches for the key passage and the right hierarchy of truths cannot be the same person that enjoys a sutra's narrative, its liturgical recitation, or its representation in ritual and art.

Scripture and Commentary

Today some of us tend to disparage commentaries that claim to reveal ultimate truths, especially those that claim to lay bare the inner structure or the central themes of a text. There is a long and well-established tradition of finding closed scholastic systems somehow suspect, of resenting attempts to close forever the plurality of possible interpretations. Additionally, many of us have been affected by modern and postmodern skepticism about the integrity of the text and the avowed neutrality of the commentator's interference with the text. But thematic and structural analysis and explication in search of the hidden meaning have been an integral part of the history of our two texts, and

we would not do justice to them or to the persons who have used and read them if we ignored such traditions.

Especially important is the tradition of reading the texts against a grid or a hierarchy of thematic headings and subheadings. On the surface, this technique may strike us as rigid and artificial, but the hierarchies often reflect accurately the use of transition terms and shifts in narrative points of view within the sutras. The technique is in fact a sophisticated way of underlining or highlighting, although at times it may indeed turn into rigid scholasticism. My understanding of the structure and the central themes of the two sutras owes much to some of these traditional analyses. Although I have tried to follow an independent course, it would not have made much sense to ignore traditional understandings of the thematic structure of the two sutras. I often consulted traditional commentaries in my attempt to open a passage to the two sutras for the modern reader. Although explicit and specific references to these commentaries have been relegated to the technical translations, some deserve special mention in this introduction. Among traditional analysis of the structure and terminology of the two sutras, I have relied primarily on the work of five Chinese polymaths. For the Longer Sutra, I have used the commentaries of Huiyuan (523–592 C.E.; Eon in Japanese), an independent pioneer of Chinese Buddhism who Pure Land traditions claim as their own, and Jizang (549–623 C.E.; Kichizō in Japanese), the person traditionally identified as the founder of the Sanlun tradition. For the Shorter Sutra, I have consulted the commentaries of Zhiyi (538–598 C.E.; Chigi in Japanese), the founder of the Tiantai (Tendai), Huijing (578–645 C.E.; Ejō in Japanese), and Kuiji (632–682 C.E.; Kiki in Japanese), Xuanzang's leading disciple. These three commentators provided most of the traditional understanding of the way the texts are structured thematically.

Scripture and Tradition

However, neither the close reading of proof texts nor the quest for textual structure and unity occur in a vacuum. Not only are there polemical, ritual, and mythical contexts for such readings, they often reflect as well the interests of a tradition, living or literary, that tends to supersede the scriptures that serve as their foundation. Pure Land followers in East Asia recognize the importance of their exegetical tradition by speaking of lineages of teachers and authoritative commentaries. The history and significance of this rhetoric of transmission is beyond the scope of the present study, but a brief survey of one such tradition will help the reader understand the way in which a mythology of transmission affects the uses and readings of a given text—at the same time opening the text to a living tradition and closing it to many other interpretive possibilities.

For this purpose, I have chosen a very broad and ideal description of the position of the Japanese denominations known as Jodo Shinshu (Jōdo Shinshū, “Shinshu” for short). This tradition is arguably the best well-known Pure Land tradition in the West—at the very least, it is the one most accessible through English translations. General writings on the Pure Land traditions often tend to assume that Shinshu interpretations of Pure Land history and doctrine are accepted by all devotees of Amitabha—which is of course not true. This is not the assumption of the following paragraphs, which are meant as illustrations of a particular interpretive strategy, not as representation of what could be said of Pure Land in general.

Shinshu doctrinal scholars claim to derive their interpretive authority from a line of theologians and exegetes that begins in India with Nagarjuna (and of course, by implication, from Shakyamuni himself). Seven leading interpreters of “Pure Land teaching” have been consecrated since the thirteenth century as the representative and authoritative figures of the denominations’ doctrinal teachings. These are Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu in India, Tanluan, Daocho and Shandao in China, and Genshin and Honen (Hōnen) in Japan. At the summit of this ascending lineage is the founder of the Shinshu tradition, Shinran, whose own teachings derive from the three sutras seen through the glass of these seven ancestral teachers.

I have described succinctly in the epilogue the contribution of two of these figures, Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu. However, in order to illustrate the critical role of traditional understanding versus contextual readings, I should note that the teachings of the “Pure Land texts” attributed to these two figures are understood in Jodo Shinshu through the lens of the other five figures in the list. Accordingly, Nagarjuna is seen as the advocate of the easy over the difficult path, and Vasubandhu’s five practices (which I have argued above are distinct though not competing practices) are seen as only the surface of the fundamental, all-inclusive practice of total surrender to faith.

Vasubandhu’s “Treatise on the Pure Land,” which itself appears to be a commentary of sorts on the Longer Sutra, was the object of an extensive and scholarly commentary by the Chinese master Tanluan (476–542 C.E.; Donran in Japanese).¹⁶ This means that by then the interpretive tradition was at least twice removed from the sutra. Be that as it may, the Jodo Shinshu tradition sees Tanluan as contributing further to the move towards a doctrine of exclusive faith. Three points in his treatise became the focus of Jodo Shinshu exegesis. First, it is possible to see Tanluan’s analysis of the sutra as focusing on specific vows, the eighteenth (Sanghavarman’s numbering) in particular. This is the vow that stipulates:

May I not gain possession of perfect awakening if, once I have attained buddhahood, any among the throng of living beings in the ten regions of the universe should single-mindedly desire to be reborn in my land with joy, with confidence, and gladness, and if they should bring to mind this desire for even ten instances of thought and yet not gain rebirth there. This excludes only those who have committed the five heinous sins and those who have reviled the Good Dharma. [Sg §46(18)]

Tanluan interpreted the vow as emphasizing the value of a single thought, partly basing himself on other parts of the three sutras. He also saw this one thought, this moment of complete trust, as being somehow the embodiment of all the vows and therefore as an expression of trust in Amitabha's power, rather than the single-mindedness of concentrated effort. He introduced the concept of "other power" (*tali*; *tariki* in Japanese) to describe the power that inheres in Amitabha's vows and merits but not in the believer, who must rely on or surrender to Amitabha's power.

Tanluan did not, however, take the additional step of reducing the value of "self power." But, according to Jodo Shinshu tradition, Tanluan in turn must be seen in light of a maturing or evolving Pure Land doctrine that rises one step higher with the teachings of the next great master, Daocho (562–645 C.E.; Dōshaku in Japanese). In his anthology of passages on the Pure Land he moved further in the direction of a doctrine of pure grace.¹⁷ He distinguished two paths to liberation: (1) the path of saints, that is the path of self-cultivation and effort, and (2) the path of Pure Land practice. Although he did not deny the inherent value of the first of these two, he argued that the second path was the only path accessible for most of us in this last age of the decay of Dharma. Daocho's Pure Land practice is still very much in agreement with the broad or generalized view of Buddhist devotion that we have seen already in the two sutras. However, he highlights even more than his predecessors the importance of one practice in particular, the "recitation of the Name."¹⁸ According to the Jodo Shinshu understanding of his work, Daocho saw this practice as the core of Pure Land practice during this age of the decay of Dharma.

This interpretation is in part colored by Jodo Shinshu understanding of the teachings of Shandao (fl. ca. 650–660; Zēndō in Japanese), who wrote, among other works, an extensive commentary on the Meditation Sutra.¹⁹ For him this sutra carries paramount authority, so that he tended to read the Shorter and the Longer Sutras in light of his understanding of the Meditation Sutra. This was the case in his analysis of the eighteenth vow, which he read as a reference to notions of the "mind" of faith found in the Meditation Sutra. The exclusionary clause of the eighteenth vow ("This excludes only those who have

committed the five heinous sins and those who have reviled the Good Dharma") he took to be only a warning, since the Meditation Sutra explicitly states that even those who have committed the five heinous sins will be reborn in the Pure Land if they trust Amitabha's vows.

Shandao also moved further in the direction of seeing the three sutras as expressions of a single and simple reality, the vows of Amitabha reduced to one promise: that those who call on his name will be reborn in the Pure Land. This is a practice, according to Shandao, that guarantees rebirth even for those who cannot claim any holiness or virtue. Shandao admits of five practices that lead to rebirth in the Pure Land; in the first four of these the reader will recognize practices that are in fact suggested in the two sutras themselves: (1) reciting the sutras (Shandao himself composed liturgical texts for the recitation of the sutras), (2) meditative cultivation (mindful rehearsal of thoughts and images), (3) veneration (worship by bowing and prostration), and (4) verbal and oblationary worship (offering praise and material oblations).²⁰ But Shandao already regards these as "secondary," and proposes that the recitation of the Name is primary; that is to say, it is the one practice that is both necessary and sufficient, the others being sufficient but not necessary.

In terms of the present study's goal of understanding the two sutras, three points are of interest in Shandao, and in Jodo Shinshu understandings of his doctrines. First, the privileged status of the Meditation Sutra, which is seen as higher in the order of authority than the Longer Sutra, points to a fundamental difference between the way the sutras are read in the present study and the way they are read in traditional interpretations (even outside of Jodo Shinshu). But it also reminds us that in actual use a sutra is much more than its own internal contexts. Second, a gradual shift in emphasis generates or supports what is for all intents and purposes a new doctrine—there is, after all, no "recitation of the Name" in the two sutras. But again, this once more calls into question our reading of the sutra apart from its living contexts. Third, the quest for a single practice can also be seen as a quest for a single interpretive principle, even if, in the end, this principle is something as elusive as the power of a name.

This is not the place to explore in detail the contributions of Honen and Shinran, or, for that matter, the place to debate the merits or demerits of exegetical arguments that assume a sort of progressive revelation. Nor is this the place to question the privileged standpoint of the persons who see themselves at the culmination of this progress. Suffice it to note here that I have selected this short segment of a tradition to highlight those aspects of the uses and interpretations of the two sutras outside India that are essential to an appreciation of the Chinese translations. These are the key issues that have made the

sutras both the center of much debate and the source of much inspiration. The present translation does not attempt to follow any East Asian interpretive tradition in any way, but the reader may benefit from keeping in mind three themes central to East Asian interpretations, which I have highlighted in the notes to the translations. These are (1) the question of the practice that should follow from belief in the sutras, (2) the meaning and centrality of the vows, and (3) the doctrines of faith and grace.

With the passing of time, these dimensions of faith in Amitabha began to acquire a life independent from the narrative of the two sutras, and began to color the way in which the sutras were read. Shifts and developments on the above three points in some ways define the most radical departures in Pure Land thought. But regardless of the ultimate outcome, they provide a shifting context for the use and understanding of the two sutras. The exact chronology of the earliest phases of these shifts is unknown to us, but it is possible to outline some of the factors that played a role in the development of doctrine and practice.

First, visualization of Amitabha and his Pure Land became associated with the practice of calling on the name of Amitabha. We do not know exactly when, but at some point in the early history of the Pure Land faith (and I see no reason for doubting that this happened in India itself) believers would call on Amitabha by repeating the phrase "Homage to Amitabha Buddha" (perhaps, *namo [a]mitabhāya buddhāya*). In China the phrase becomes even more formalized by the fact that it is a transliteration of Sanskrit sounds (*Namo Amituo-fo*).²¹ Thus, "calling the Name" is in fact a ritualized (and therefore sacralized) invocation of the power in the Name. At some point this ritual calling was taken to be either an integral part or the core of the practice of recollecting the Buddha Amitabha.

Second, Dharmakara's vows came to be seen as the core or main message of the Longer Sutra and the key teaching of all three sutras—Shorter, Longer, and Meditation. Third, parallel to the previous two developments, belief in Amitabha became associated with a doctrine of grace, faith, and surrender. The power of the vows came to be seen as transferable—accessible to the believer who surrenders in complete trust. The highest expression of surrender is in fact the humble calling of the name of one's savior, so it is not difficult to see how believers would identify the ritual calling with faith receptive to the power of the vows.

The Vows

The vows were taken as guarantees that the simple calling on Amitabha would produce rebirth in the Pure Land. This shift is in a

continuum with earlier practices, found elsewhere in Indian religion, such as belief in the power of names (especially those of divinities), shortcuts to the process of karma (especially devotional alternatives), and the power of sincere devotion. Many of these found expression in Mahayana sutras that, like the Sukhavativyuha sutras, embodied the belief in buddha-fields and cosmic buddhas. Within the Amitabha tradition, the shift towards a doctrine of pure faith seems to have occurred only when the tradition reached China and developed, in the sixth and seventh centuries C.E., the exegetical and theological perspectives summarized above.

Among these changes a need arose to somehow close the interpretive book on the vows. Considering the number of variant versions and readings of Dharmakara's vows available to the Chinese, the possibility of a single and authoritative understanding must have seemed as a guarantee not only of clarity, but of a sure path to salvation. Accordingly, the East Asian tradition places great importance on the interpretation of the vows, which is usually based on the selection of a number of proof texts from within the vows themselves. These are the core or essential vows, or, in more theological terms, the vows (or the single vow) that are (is) the source for all other vows.

Four have been especially important as they are taken to contain the key to the meaning and practice of faith. These are (Sanghavarman's numbering): the seventeenth, promising that all buddhas in the universe will praise the name of Amitabha; the eighteenth, promising rebirth in the Pure Land even to those who aspire for rebirth ten times or less (and also adding the exclusionary clause); the nineteenth, promising that Amitabha will appear to the believer on his deathbed; and the twentieth, promising rebirth to those who hear the name of Amitabha. The eighteenth is regarded as the most important and is often seen as the core meaning of the whole Longer Sutra.

But an additional group of four has also been considered crucial to the interpretation of the two sutras.²² All four appear to be statements guaranteeing certain conditions in the Pure Land: the eleventh states that awakening and nirvana are guaranteed for those reborn there, the twelfth guarantees Amitabha's infinite halo, the thirteenth, his infinite life span, and the twenty-second guarantees full bodhisattvahood for those reborn in the Pure Land.

In order to understand the significance of these beliefs one has to accept the extent to which the meaning of a text for a particular reader or group of readers can have a life independent of certain constraints of language and history. Traditional exegetes connect the vows to the living practice of their own traditions and communities by special technical readings, through the community's sense of what is true belief, or by appealing directly to narrative and pictorial imagery. For

instance, to "aspire ten times or less" is sometimes understood by some sort of technical shorthand to mean reciting "the Name" (that is "Namo Amituo-fo" or "Namu Amida Butsu") ten times or less, or even reciting it once. Yet, the same interpretation can be derived non-technically from a direct appeal to a doctrine of pure grace (which, as you might recall, guarantees the effectiveness of calling the Name). And then again, the same calling can form part of a funerary ritual in which it is meant to revive that gem of a narrative nutshell, Amitabha descending to meet the believer on his or her deathbed.

Grace

The most important twist to the interpretation of the vows, however, is the shift in the direction of understanding the vows as expressions of the Buddha's gift to common, imperfect human beings. This is a shift that I would argue is justified to a certain extent, since the doctrine of the vows is very much a doctrine of the sharing of infinite merit with those who can only hope to have very imperfect virtue, if any at all. The first four of the eight vows summarized above already suggest an undeserved gift. I would not argue for a reading of the vows along the lines of a doctrine of absolute pure grace, but it is difficult to imagine the two sutras, especially the Longer Sutra, as anything but a challenge to the other extreme—a doctrine of absolute reliance on self-cultivation and the efficacy of human effort.

The concepts of boundless compassion and immeasurable merit are so common to the Mahayana sutras that perhaps we tend to overlook their presence and importance. We may read as hyperbole what many believers may have read as a promise or a guarantee of grace. Again, one does not have to advocate a radical departure from so-called main-line Buddhist notions of effort. But if we can learn anything from the East Asian tradition it is the importance, throughout Mahayana Buddhism, of alternatives to morality, meditation, and knowledge. Some of these alternatives—such as the generalized theme of the rewards of devotion—can be seen as an integral part of the putatively universal doctrine of individual responsibility, karma, and merit. But the sutras show, again and again, that there are also alternatives that are based on the guarantees offered by the merit and karma of a saintly person who shares this good karma with others. These are perhaps parallel systems of belief, not alternatives, since they appear to coexist peacefully with other teachings that we have come to regard as normative.²³

The most common form of these parallel or alternative ways to salvation is, interestingly enough, the belief in the quasi-magical power of vows and names. There is no bodhisattva worth his or her salt who does not offer to save living beings from all sorts of dangers and sins if they only call upon this bodhisattva's name. And there is no bodhisat-

tva in Mahayana Buddhism who does not aspire to purify a buddha-field by the power of his vows.

Practice

It is therefore not surprising that a ritual adoption or confirmation of the vow should be at the core of many Mahayana liturgies. Nor is it surprising that the recitation of the name of buddhas and bodhisattvas (often in the form "namo" plus the name) is a common practice in the literature and in the field. This is not to say that the two sutras are about these practices or that they explicitly offer scriptural support for them. Rather, I am only pointing to the ritual and belief contexts that may give meaning to many an obscure statement in the sutras and in the associated exegetical traditions.

Even among those who advocate the single-minded recitation of the Name, the sutras retain a broad and complex contextual setting. For instance, Shandao himself, notwithstanding his advocacy of the recitation, discussed extensively other practices and composed liturgies that included the recitation of sections of the two sutras. Similarly, traditions that advocate doctrines of effort and self-reliance make extensive use of rituals of dedication of merit and of rituals for taking the bodhisattva vows. Zhiyi's complex scholastic and monastic system of self-cultivation, for instance, holds as one of its central practices a type of mindfulness or recollection of Amitabha and his Pure Land. In one of the most common themes in East Asian funeral rituals, an officiant acts as the mouthpiece for the deceased by reciting for him or her a final aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land.

A shift towards a radical doctrine of grace that would reject other practices is neither historically ancient nor dominant today. Much Pure Land practice throughout the world is still focused on a type of faith and a theology of grace that coexist—with greater or lesser tension—with a theology of effort and the practice of meditation. Although some textbooks still describe Pure Land faith in the terms we have inherited from the Japanese schools, there is generally much more ambivalence regarding the relative importance of effort and grace, and hence regarding the way in which the two sutras must be read.

Tibetan Buddhists who practice the worship of Amitabha and the recitation of his name usually do so in combination with other practices—meditation, fasting, prostrations—clearly involving effort and in harmony with Mahayana practices common to other schools. At least as practiced in large monasteries, or as recommended by the more learned monks, Amitabha practice and doctrine among Tibetan Buddhists is an amalgam of a Buddhism of faith and a Buddhism of ascetic effort. The same is true even today in most Chinese temples. Similar

uses and interpretations are found in the Korean and Vietnamese traditions.

A word of caution is in order, however. Mahayana belief and practice that combine faith and ascetic effort should not be construed as a syncretic fusion of more pristine, independent practices. It is impossible to tell exactly what sort of belief and cultic systems surrounded the early stages of the faith in Amitabha's vow and the hope of rebirth in his Pure Land. Most likely, these early beliefs in fact accepted simultaneously various styles of belief and practice that we, as Western readers under the influence of our own history of the war between grace and works, would consider irreconcilable. In other words, it may be that the putative depuration of a pristine, and exclusive, doctrine of pure faith is unique to the traditions formed in thirteenth-century Japan.²⁴

Furthermore, in many of these settings, especially in China, Korea, and Vietnam, the cult of Amitabha not only competes with other lay and monastic cults, such as that of the Future Buddha Maitreya, but also coexists with them, and shares in many of their characteristics and associated beliefs. Likewise, it often shares with these beliefs individual believers or whole communities. In Japan, the cult of Amitabha continues to be associated with the cult of Kannon, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. In some ways, these associations can be seen as continuations of, or parallels to, the close association of Amitabha with the cult of all buddhas of the universe depicted in the two sutras.

Return to the Present Translations

The two sutras have a long history behind them and have a long future ahead. It has been the purpose of this short introduction to remind the reader of some salient aspects of this history and the way in which it may have affected and may continue to affect our readings of the two sutras.

I have made every effort to separate my understanding of the commentarial tradition from my understanding of what the text of the Chinese translations will allow. But, needless to say, my knowledge of the views of commentators and scholastics must have colored my translation. Although the present translation does not follow any particular East Asian commentary, some of the issues raised by this tradition are referred to in the notes below and will be discussed in more detail in the technical translations.

I have also tried to avoid as much as possible any conflation of my reading of the Chinese with my knowledge of the Sanskrit. This is easier said than done, for Chinese translations of Buddhist texts are notorious for their use of a hybrid Chinese that refuses to surrender its

secrets to those unfamiliar with Sanskrit syntax and terminology. I have relied on my knowledge of Sanskrit only when everything else failed. I tried to read the Chinese text as a Chinese reader ignorant of Sanskrit would. Nevertheless, I read the two sutras as would someone familiar with other Mahayana sutras.

The Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha Sutra
English Translation
of the Chinese Version of Kumarajiva

The Shorter Discourse
The Sutra of Amita Buddha
Kumarajiva's Chinese Version, the Amito-jing

Title

The Sutra on Buddha Amita, as preached by the Buddha Shakyamuni.
Translated by Tripitaka Master Kumarajiva of Kucha, in the Yao Qin
Dynasty.

Preamble: The Setting and the Audience

- §1. This I have heard. At one time, the Buddha was staying in the royal capital city of Shravasti, in Prince Jeta's grove. He was staying in the cloistered park that the generous Anathapindada gave to the Buddhist Order in Prince Jeta's grove.
- §2. At that time the Buddha was surrounded by a large assembly of monks—one thousand two hundred fifty of them. These monks were all great arhats, highly respected among the people for their holiness.
- §3. Among them were the elders Shariputra and Maha-Maudgalyayana, and Maha-Kashyapa, Maha-Katyayana, Maha-Kaushthila, Revata, Chula-Panthaka, Nanda, Ananda, Rahula, Gavampati, Pindola Bharadvaja, Kalodayin, Maha-Kapphina, Vakkula, Anuruddha—and other great disciples like these.
- §4. And he was also accompanied by an assembly of bodhisattvas mahasattvas; present were the bodhisattva Manjushri, the Prince of Dharma, as well as the future Buddha, the bodhisattva Maitreya, also known as Bodhisattva Ajita. The bodhisattva Gandhahastin, and the bodhisattva Nityodyukta were also there, with other great bodhisattvas like these.
- §5. And the Buddha was likewise accompanied by a large

crowd of countless gods—Shakra, known as Indra, the King of the gods, and many others.

The Main Discourse

The Land of Supreme Bliss

- §6. Then, the Buddha spoke to the Venerable Shariputra: "West of here, a hundred billion buddha-fields away, there is a world system called 'Supreme Bliss.' In that field there is a buddha named 'Amita.' At this very moment he dwells in that faraway land, preaching the Dharma.
- §7. "Shariputra, why is that field called 'Supreme Bliss'? Because the living beings in that realm are free from all forms of suffering and they only experience all forms of happiness. Therefore, it is called 'Supreme Bliss.'
- §8. "Furthermore, Shariputra, all around this Land of Supreme Bliss, there are seven tiers of railings, seven rows of netting, and seven rows of trees. They are all made of the four precious substances. All around, they encircle the perimeter of this land. Therefore, that land is called 'Supreme Bliss.'
- §9. "Furthermore, Shariputra, in the Land of Supreme Bliss there are bathing pools made of the seven precious substances.¹ They are filled with the best water, endowed with eight good qualities: their water is always limpid, cool, sweet-tasting, light, soft, placid, healthy, and thirst-quenching. The bottom of these pools is completely covered with golden sand. In each of their four sides, they have steps made of gold, silver, lapis-lazuli, and crystal.
- "Above, there are towered pavilions, adorned with gold, silver, lapis-lazuli, crystal, coral, red pearls, and agate.² On the surface of the pools, there are lotus blossoms as large as cart wheels. These are blue colored, with a blue sheen; yellow colored, with a yellow sheen; red colored, with a red sheen; white colored, with a white sheen; they are delicate and fragrant.
- "Shariputra, in the Land of Supreme Bliss, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.
- §10. "Furthermore, Shariputra, in this buddha-field celestial music is constantly heard. And the ground is made of gold. Four times a day, exactly on the hour, day and night, mandara flowers rain down from heaven. Early every morning, each living being in this land picks some of those exquisite flowers, places them in the hem of his robe, and travels to worship with these flowers a hundred billion buddhas in other worlds in the other regions of the universe. Immediately thereafter, each of these persons returns, in

time for his forenoon meal, to this, his own world, and takes his meal and afternoon stroll.

"Shariputra, in the Land of Supreme Bliss, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.

- §11. "Moreover, Shariputra, in that land you will always see many flocks of rare and exquisite birds of many colors—white egrets, peacocks, parrots, shari and kalavinka birds, and those birds called 'Living-Together.' Doves of these birds gather to sing with soothing, exquisite voices four times a day, exactly on the hour, day and night. Their voices proclaim the tenets of the Buddha's teaching—for instance, they sing of the five spiritual faculties, of the five spiritual powers, of the seven aspects of awakening, of the Eightfold Path that is followed by those of spiritual nobility, and of many other aspects of the Buddha's Dharma. When the living beings in that buddha-field hear such song, they all immediately enjoy thoughts of the Buddha, of his Dharma, and of his Order, and keep these three in mind incessantly.
- §12. "Shariputra, you should not say that these birds are actually born here as a result of their past evil deeds. Why not? Because the three undesirable courses of rebirth are not found in this buddha-field. Moreover, Shariputra, in this buddha-land even the names of the three undesirable paths of rebirth are not to be found. How then could they exist in fact? The birds that sing in this buddha-field have all been created by the Buddha Amita himself, by means of his miraculous power, because he wanted to have them broadcast the sound of the Dharma.
- §13. "Shariputra, in that buddha-land, a subtle breeze blows, swaying the rows of jeweled trees and the jeweled nets, so that they emit an exquisite sound, like that of hundreds of thousands of diverse kinds of musical instruments playing together at the same time. All those who hear this sound enjoy spontaneously and immediately thoughts of the Buddha, of his Dharma, and of his Order, and keep these three in mind incessantly, bringing to mind the Buddha, bringing to mind his Dharma, bringing to mind his Order.
- "Shariputra, in that buddha-land, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.
- The Buddha Presiding Over the Land of Supreme Bliss**
- §14. "What do you think, Shariputra? Why is this Buddha called 'Amita'—'measureless'? Shariputra, this Buddha's beaming light is measureless. It shines without obstruction into buddha-fields in the ten directions. Therefore, he is called 'Amita.'
- §15. "Furthermore, Shariputra, this Buddha's life-span, and the

life-span of the human beings in his buddha-field as well, has a duration of measureless, boundless, countless, cosmic ages. For this reason too he is called 'measureless,' 'Amita.'

"Shariputra, ten cosmic ages have now passed since the Buddha Amita attained buddhahood.

The Inhabitants of the Land of Supreme Bliss

§16. "Furthermore, Shariputra, this Buddha has measureless, inestimable numbers of disciples that are auditors, all of them arhats. Their number cannot be grasped. The same is true also of the community of bodhisattvas in that land.

"Shariputra, in that buddha-land, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.

§17. "Furthermore, Shariputra, all living beings born in the Land of Supreme Bliss will progress irreversibly in the path. Many among them are only one more birth away from the full awakening of a buddha. Their numbers are vast. Their numbers cannot be grasped. One can only speak of their spiritual careers in terms of measureless, boundless, incalculable, cosmic ages.

Exhortation

§18. "Shariputra, living beings who hear this should generate an earnest desire, wishing to be reborn in that land. Why? Because in that land one will be able to meet in one place persons of such high virtue as the many living beings I have described here. Shariputra, one cannot be reborn in that buddha-field, if one depends on the merit of only a few roots of goodness.

§19. "Shariputra, if good men or good women hear this explanation of the qualities of the Buddha Amita, and embrace his name, and keep it in mind single-mindedly and without distraction, be it for one day, or for two, for three, for four, for five, for six, or for seven days, then, when their lives come to an end, the Buddha Amita, together with his holy entourage, will appear before them. At the time of their death, their minds free of any distorted views, they will be able to be reborn forthwith in Amita Buddha's Land of Supreme Bliss.

§20. "Shariputra, I have seen the benefit of this. Therefore, I say this to you: A living being who hears this discourse should aspire to be reborn in that land.

Confirmation: All Buddhas Praise Their Lands

§21. "Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise the inconceivable merits of the Buddha Amita, other buddhas, in the eastern

regions of the universe, praise him—buddhas as many as the number of grains of sand in the Ganges. Each one of these buddhas—buddhas like the Buddha Akshobhya, the Buddha Sumeru's Emblem, the Buddha Great Sumeru, the Buddha Sumeru's Light, the Buddha Exquisite Voice, and others—each in his own land extends his broad and long tongue, encompassing all the worlds in their three thousandfold, great thousandfold, world systems. Then, each of these buddhas makes a solemn declaration, proclaiming these true words: 'O living beings, you should believe in this discourse, which praises inconceivable virtues—the discourse called Receiving the Protection of All Buddhas.'

§22. "Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise the inconceivable merits of the Buddha Amita, other buddhas, in the southern regions of the universe, praise him—buddhas as many as the number of grains of sand in the Ganges. Each one of these buddhas—buddhas like the Buddha Beacon of the Sun and Moon, the Buddha Splendor of Fame, the Buddha Great Heap of Flames, the Buddha Sumeru's Beacon, the Buddha Inestimable Vigor, and others—each in his own land extends his broad and long tongue, encompassing all the worlds in three thousandfold, great thousandfold, world systems. Then, each of these buddhas makes a solemn declaration, proclaiming these true words: 'O living beings, you should believe in this discourse, which praises inconceivable virtues—the discourse called Receiving the Protection of All Buddhas.'

§23. "Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise the inconceivable merits of the Buddha Amita, other buddhas, in the western regions of the universe, praise him—buddhas as many as the number of grains of sand in the Ganges. Each one of these buddhas—buddhas like the Buddha Measureless Life-Span, the Buddha Measureless Banner, the Buddha Measureless Pennant, the Buddha Magnificent Sunlight, the Buddha Magnificent Moonlight, the Buddha Jewel Pennant, the Buddha Pure Beaming Light, and others—each in his own land extends his broad and long tongue, encompassing all the worlds in three thousandfold, great thousandfold, world systems. Then, each of these buddhas makes a solemn declaration, proclaiming these true words: 'O living beings, you should believe in this discourse, which praises inconceivable virtues—the discourse called Receiving the Protection of All Buddhas.'

§24. "Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise the inconceivable merits of the Buddha Amita, other buddhas, in the northern regions of the universe, praise him—buddhas as many as the number of grains of sand in the Ganges. Each one of these buddhas—buddhas like the Buddha Heap of Flames, the Buddha Voice

of the Invincible, the Buddha Unconquerable, the Buddha Descended from the Sun, the Buddha Netting Moonbeams, and others—each in his own land extends his broad and long tongue, encompassing all the worlds in three thousandfold, great thousandfold, world systems. Then, each of these buddhas makes a solemn declaration, proclaiming these true words: 'O living beings, you should believe in this discourse, which praises inconceivable virtues—the discourse called Receiving the Protection of All Buddhas.'

§25. "Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise the inconceivable merits of the Buddha Amita, other buddhas, in the regions in the lower regions of the universe, praise him—buddhas as many as the number of grains of sand in the Ganges. Each one of these buddhas—buddhas like the Buddha Lion, the Buddha Fame, the Buddha Beaming Light of Fame, the Buddha Dharma, the Buddha Banner of Dharma, the Buddha Upholder of Dharma, and others—each in his own land extends his broad and long tongue, encompassing all the worlds in three thousandfold, great thousandfold, world systems. Then, each of these buddhas makes a solemn declaration, proclaiming these true words: 'O living beings, you should believe in this discourse, which praises inconceivable virtues—the discourse called Receiving the Protection of All Buddhas.'

§26. "Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise the inconceivable merits of the Buddha Amita, other buddhas, in the regions in the higher regions of the universe, praise him—buddhas as many as the number of grains of sand in the Ganges. Each one of these buddhas—buddhas like the Buddha Voice of Brahma, the Buddha King of the Zodiac, the Buddha Incomparable Fragrance, the Buddha Fragrant Light, the Buddha Heap of Flames, the Buddha Lovely Color of a Jeweled Lotus, the Buddha Jeweled Lotus Virtue, the Buddha Discerning All Meanings, the Buddha Sumneru's Grandeur, and others—each in his own land extends his broad and long tongue, encompassing all the worlds in three thousandfold, great thousandfold, world systems. Then, each of these buddhas makes a solemn declaration, proclaiming these true words: 'O living beings, you should believe in this discourse, which praises inconceivable virtues—the discourse called Receiving the Protection of All Buddhas.'

Trust, Commitment, Embracing

Exhortation by Shakyamuni

§27. "Shariputra, what do you think? Why is this discourse called The Discourse of Receiving the Protection of All Buddhas?

Shariputra, if good men or good women hear this discourse and keep it in mind, or hear the name of all buddhas, these good men and good women will all be protected and remembered by all buddhas, they will all become irreversible in their progress toward unsurpassable, complete awakening. Therefore, Shariputra, all of you should accept with faith these, my words, and the words pronounced by all buddhas.

Benefits of the Vow

§28. "Shariputra, those who have made the vow, are now making the vow, or will make the vow, and with it resolve to be reborn in the land of Amita Buddha, they all alike will not fall back from unsurpassable, complete awakening. They are already born, they are being born, or they will be born in that land. Therefore, Shariputra, good men or good women who believe in this should make a vow to be reborn in that land.

Exhortation by All the Buddhas: The Buddha's Task

§29. "Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise the inconceivable virtues of all buddhas, all buddhas praise my inconceivable virtues, saying: 'Shakyamuni Buddha has been able to accomplish this most difficult and marvelous task. In this Saha World, during this evil age plagued by the five corruptions—the corruption of the evil cosmic age, the corruption of views, the corruption of the afflictions, the corruption of living beings, and the corruption of the life span—he has attained unsurpassable, perfect awakening, and has preached, for the sake of living beings, this Dharma that the whole world finds so difficult to believe in.'

§30. "Shariputra, you should know that during this evil age plagued by the five corruptions I have carried out this difficult task. I have attained unsurpassable, perfect awakening, and I have, for the sake of living beings, preached this Dharma that is so difficult to believe in. This was a most difficult task."

Coda

§31. As the Buddha finished delivering this discourse, Shariputra, with all the monks, and the gods, humans, asuras, and all the other living beings in the whole world, having heard these words of the Buddha, rejoiced with his words and accepted them with faith. They then paid homage to the Buddha, and went their way.